Ore no Imōto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai Volume 2

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These are novel illustrations that were included in Volume 2

俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない②

冷戦関係にあった妹・桐乃からとんでもない秘密をカミングアウトされ、ガラにもなく相談に乗ってやる——という思い出したくもない出来事からしばらく経つが、俺たち兄妹の冷めた関係は変わりゃしなかった。ところが“人生相談”はまだ続くらしく、「エロゲー速攻クリアしろ」だの「不快にした責任とりなさい」（どうしろと？）だの見下し態度全開で言ってくるからマジで勘弁して欲しい。誰だこんな女を「可愛い」なんて言う奴は？　でまあ今回俺に下った指令は「夏の想い出」作り（？）。どうも都内某所で開催される、なんたらとかいう祭りに連れてけってことらしいんだが……。

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伏見(ふしみ)つかさ

感想のおたより、すべて嬉しく読ませてもらっています。面白かったの一言に、どれだけ救われているか分かりません。世辞も誇張もなく、真の意味で、作家を続けていられるのは皆様のおかげです。より良い作品をお届けできるよう、驕らず弛まず精進いたします。

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十三番目のアリス④
俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない
俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない②

イラスト:かんざきひろ

イラストレーター兼アニメーター。1978年生まれ。本業の傍ら、海外でレコードをリリースするなど音楽活動もこなす何でも屋状態の変な緑色の生物。
HP http://nekomimi.tabgraphics.under.jp/

カバー／旭印刷

友母の森がこんなに平和なわけがない 2

伏見つかさ
Illustration・かんざきひろ
Tsukasa Fushimi

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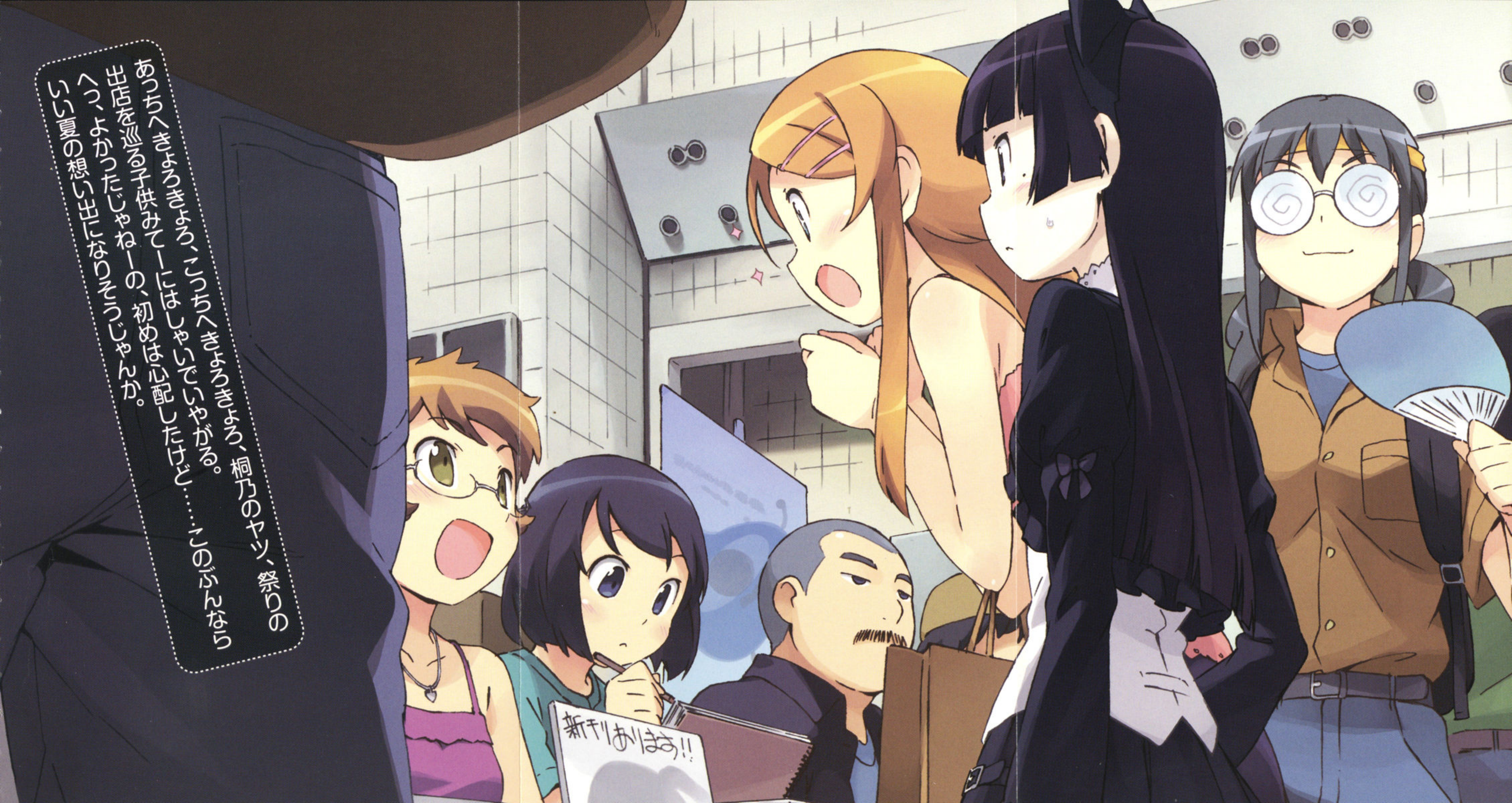
C O N T E N T S

デザイン●伸童舎

Ore no imouto ga konnani kawaii wake ga nai ②


あっちへきょろきょろ、こっちへきょろきょろ、桐乃のヤツ、祭りの出店を巡る子供みてーにはしゃいでいやがる。へっ、よかったじゃねーの、初めは心配したけど……このぶんならいい夏の想い出になりそうじゃんか。
新刊おいまう!!

俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない②

伏見つかさ
Tsukasa Fushimi
Illustration・かんざきひろ

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Chapter 1

第一章

The season was summer. It was a Saturday in July, and finals were drawing near.

Today, I had shut myself up in the only room without air conditioning (that is, my room), and was facing my desk with a look of desperation… or perhaps a better word for it would be anguish.

"U… Ugh…"

Like a normal second year high school student, I was studying for finals… not.

"U… Ugh…"

I was playing through a new eroge, "Little Sister Wars – Siscalypse." [1]

"…Oo!"

Tap tap tap tap!

I intensely manipulated the USB controller I had plugged into the laptop.

On the screen, there were two strangely dressed girls, jumping around and engaged in a grand battle. They punched and kicked at each other and waved around staves and guns. Sometimes, flashes of brilliant light would signal the depletion of a gauge meter, and the display would completely fill with tentacles, or maybe time would stop, or maybe tens of thousands of little sisters would be summoned… that kind of thing.

"Little Sister Wars – Siscalypse." – or as the fans had already dubbed it, "Siscali," – was different than any adventure game I had played up to now.

I would read the text, then make some choices at branch points, and then "capture" little sisters as I saw more events with them… those simple elements were definitely there, but after all that's said and done, "Siscali " had a growth portion and a battle portion. At the start, you picked a little sister to develop, leveled her up, taught her special moves, and then had to win battles with other girls at various points in the game. That was the kind of system "Siscali" had. Also, if you could connect to the internet, you could play the game in online multiplayer battles.

There were already tens of thousands of players online , so the Siscali server was a huge success. Is there no more decency left in this world?

And then…

"Ah!"

The lightning-based little sister I was using took the enemy little sister's tentacle attack fully, and was blown to the edges of the screen. Her hit points gauge hit zero in an instant, and her clothes tore and burst open.

Uaaaahh! Ahh… ahhh… ahh… (<- Echo).

Game over. The character I was controlling, now with her clothes torn, stood defeated at the foot of the enemy girl with the black cloak.

"Time to go home. Your big brother is waiting for you. "

"Dammiiiit, I lost again to her! Isn't she just a bit too strong?! Is she actually beatable?!"

After hearing her strangely irritating, fully voiced words of victory, I tossed my controller away and banged on my desk, frustrated. And then…

"Aaaah."

Suddenly, I came back to my senses. Feeling as if I had just woken up from being hypnotized, I held my head.

… What the hell am I doing…?

Ever since the morning of this day off, I, a seventeen year old male, had been shut in my room zealously playing this little sister eroge.

That is what I, Kousaka Kyousuke, am doing right now. No, no no. That's wrong. This is wrong.

I'm actually an incredibly average high school student; it's not like I'm an otaku or something.

Even though I have a little sister, to be playing little sister eroge like this all day… there's a reaaaally deep reason for it. I'm not trying to hide anything – this isn't mine… it's my little sister's.

My sister forcibly told me “play this,” and so I found myself unwillingly playing this eroge.

… I’m not lying. You might think this is completely unbelievable, but my outrageous sister loves little sister eroge, and watches lots of children’s anime.

That’s right… That fated day.

That day when I accidentally caught a glimpse of the secret hobby she was trying so hard to hide.

And with that, while still keeping up that icy cold façade she has always kept up with me, she asked me for life advice.

Having her prized collection shown to me, being terribly abused by her, being forced against my will to play eroge, being taken along to an offline meeting, being dragged along to Akiba…

And through this all, I was just spinning my wheels helplessly. In any case, even though we had barely ever talked to each other before then, in those few weeks we had more than ten year’s worth of conversation.

After that, I felt like I knew just a bit more about the sister that I had known nothing about up to that point, and just a bit more about these otaku that I had been prejudiced against.

Well, and so, I felt like I had taken one step forwards.

My sister was able to make otaku friends with whom she could talk openly about anime, and I even managed to defuse the terrible situation with my father when he found out about her hobby.

Ever since then, neither my father nor my mother had brought up the subject of Kirino's hobby even once, and on the surface everything had returned to what it was like before my parents had found out. At that time, my father had screamed at me to "Do what you want!"

And, even if he said those words in anger, my father never went back on anything he said, even if he had only said it once.

It would also be incredibly unlikely for him to bring up this issue after so much time had passed already.

Those events had happened in June, and a month had already passed since then.

So that's how things were now.

There was no longer any reason for my sister's hobby to throw this family into disarray.

The life advice shop of Kousaka Kyousuke, which had been open for an unexpectedly long time, had at long last closed its doors.

I had finally been released from those troublesome things, and once again would return to the same dry relationship I had once had with my sister, living out my days at my own pace in peace and tranquility…

At least, that's what I had thought.

"Haah…"

Why is it then that after that, I've been called on multiple times by my sister under the pretense of "life advice," and have had unreasonable requests continually forced on me?

Just a few days ago, she forced this “Siscali” into my hands, saying something like “It’s good, so finish it with a swift attack. Just do it.” Whatever, I don’t understand at all.

And then I obediently did as I was told… yes, I know, pretty pathetic.

“Agh… stop stop! Can I seriously do this?!”

This won’t work. I’m at my limit. Do you have any idea what kind of stress I’m feeling, playing little sister eroge while having a real little sister? Can you imagine it ? For those who have little sisters in real life, you should be able to understand… I could feel myself falling gradually into complete misery.

I stood up, and made a wild dive for the bed.

Whoosh. Feeling sluggish, I looked around my room. My desk, my bookshelf, my closet… I had all the bare essentials in my 6 tatami room [2]. The Japanese calendar on my wall was flipped to July.

I would be the first to admit that the room had very little personality, but that’s fine with me. Banzai for mediocrity. Viva the normal life.

That laid-back lifestyle was really what suited me best.

And that's why what I was doing right now was really out of character.

"… Alright, let's get some tea."

Needing to sate my thirst after getting so agitated by the game, I left my room.

My house was a single building consisting of two stories, and both my room and my sister's room were on the second floor. Going down the stairs, the entranceway was on the right, and on the left was the door to the living room.

Going into the living room, I saw the sister in question chatting on the phone.

Sitting as always in her usual spot on the sofa, her legs were crossed under her very short miniskirt. It was a very revealing outfit, but it's not like looking at her charming figure like this was anything special.

No matter how attractive she was, it's not like I would ever look at her that way.

My sister in her daring outfit continued to talk on the phone, looking happy and periodically letting out a burst of laughter. She might be talking to some of her friends from school.

"Ahaha. Is that right? Yeah, uh-huh…"

As always, she was really a wolf in sheep's clothing…

(My sister has her otaku side and her normal side [3], and she uses a different side depending on who she's talking to, but lately I've come to understand which side she was using just by her facial expression and how she speaks.)

Her hair was dyed a light brown, both her ears were pierced, and her long nails were manicured to a glossy shine. Even though she would be able to turn heads even without cosmetics, she had carefully polished up her face with makeup. She had an air of maturity about her quite unfitting for a junior high school student.

She was tall and slender, but also filled out in the right places.

This absurdly stylish girl was my sister, Kousaka Kirino.

Presently, she was fourteen. She was a student at a local junior high school. She also modeled for a teen magazine, was a track and field star, and scored fifth place in the prefecture on academic tests. She was a freak . To a thoroughly normal brother like me, there was nothing more annoying than this.

"Alright. Ok, I'll be waiting for you~!"

As I listened to her very little-sister-like coaxing voice, I passed by the side of the couch, and took out the green tea. Pouring some out, I drank an entire glass.

"Phew…"

I relished the refreshing feeling of the liquid passing through my throat. Ahhh, that hit the spot.

Well, that's that then. Having gotten what I came for, I treid to leave the room.

With masterfully thief-like footsteps, I walked sneakily to one corner of the living room. But my great efforts

were in vain, for the minute I set my hand on the doorknob I heard a voice calling to me.

"Hey."

It was an incredibly cold single word.

"… What?"

Without even turning around, I sent back a reluctant response.

See? Our relationship was not great at all.

With undisguised disgust, she mumbled listlessly.

"You do it?"

"… Huh…? Did I do what…?"

"I asked you if you did it. That thing I lent you… do I have to spell it out for you? Are you that stupid?"

Can you believe this? Is this how a little sister should speak to her brother? It was more like she was a noble and she was speaking to her manservant. Only turning my neck, I spit out an annoyed response.

"Yeah, yeah, I did it. I was playing it just now."

"Huh? What…? You were locked up in your room since morning playing an eroge?"

"You're the one who told me to play it, weren't you?! Don't look at me like I did something wrong! Shouldn't you be praising me?!"

"You're becoming just like an erogamer."

"Am I supposed to be happy about that?!?!"

You're just making fun of me, aren't you? That's what you're doing, aren't you, you asshole?!

Argh…! This damn girl… is seriously not cute at all!

That smile that she gave me that other day… as I thought, it must have been a hallucination, wasn't it?!

There's no way my little sister could be that cute.

Oogh. This won't do. I'm getting so angry that I'm feeling dizzy…

Watching as I began to stagger, Kirino rested her chin on her hands and spoke.

"And? Did you at least clear the campaign once?"

"No… not yet…"

As soon as I said that, Kirino clicked her tongue and gave me a disappointed look.

"Huh? Didn't I tell you to attack it swiftly and clear it?! "

"The enemy's too strong and I can't beat her… no, that 's not it! In the first place! I've already asked this, but why do I have to do this?! Especially since finals are coming up?!"

"Only idiots who haven't been keeping up with their work panic like this before a test."

"…."

Well, occasionally she spits out something logical… she's pretty hard to deal with, isn't she?

"Well, that might be so, but…!"

But, while that may be true, I still don't think I should be spending this time playing eroge.

So please explain to me why I have to do these kinds of things. Please explain.

"So what's the reason? I don't think you even told me before."

Bolding puffing her chest, she responded this way.

"It's life advice."

I don't get it. Life advice is when you listen to someone 's problems, and then help them fix those problems, right ?

Why is it that even though my sister's problems had been resolved, I still had to beat these eroge?

Kirino continued.

"The true charm of this game is that you can use your clear data, and with the little sister character you developed you can fight other people. If you don't clear

it quickly, then we can't battle each other, right? Don't you understand at least that much?"

"Do it with someone else!"

There should be an online mode… right? That mode should exist, right? Although, I don't know much about this stuff.

Don't spew out unreasonable requests as if they were the most natural thing in the world! Who the hell do you think I am? I have to do such ridiculous things just so I can be this girl's sparring partner? Don't screw with me.

"I can't win online… I'm pretty bad at these kinds of fighting games."

"I'm also really bad at them! In the first place, mom and dad never bought me a game console, so I haven't exactly played many games in my life!"

"I know. That's why I lent this to you. You should be grateful."

At long last, I understand. You just wanted to play the game with someone you know you can beat, right?

You want to battle someone. But you don't want to lose. So you need a handicap, or someone who would let you win.

And eventually, you want to be able to beat serious opponents…

Hmph. However I think about it, she's acting like a spoiled brat…

"W-well, for now, I have to study for my finals, so I can't spare too much time for games."

"Hmph. Are you stupid or something?"

Kirino ridiculed me with a catty expression.

If annoying your older brother was considered a talent , then she would be a genius.

"If you don't have time, then you should clear it quickly. At any rate, I guess I can give you some tips… but unfortunately I'm busy today so I can't do that now."

Is she listening to a word I'm saying? I said I don't want to play this game!

I felt creases beginning to form on my forehead, and Kirino continued.

"… geez. Have you tried going to a walkthrough site? After all, I made sure that you should be able to connect to the internet even from your room."

"… Walkthrough site?"

"Yes. Just go to 'Siscali@Wiki' and there are plenty of game details there. I also used that site to clear the game."

"'At Wiki'? What's that?"

"Huh? Did you get amnesia or something? Didn't I already tell you?"

"Uh…. a-ahh…. that thing."

Yeah… that was it… broadly speaking, Wiki was a site where users could add and change information about various things by themselves. [4]

So, this "Siscali@Wiki" was probably a place where lots of people had gathered information about Siscali.

After hearing Kirino's advice, I wondered if I should try the game for just a bit longer. Of course, I still really didn't want to play a little sister game, but stopping in the middle like this just wouldn't feel right. And also, the fighting portions of the games… I guess those were… relatively… uhh… interesting… I guess.

"So, go look at the site, and tomorrow please clear the game completely. Understand?"

"….."

Why does she look so proud of herself?

"Are you hard of hearing? I asked you if you understood."

"Ahh, yeah yeah yeah… I'll do it, I got it. Tomorrow. I' ll see what I can do."

Geez, I guess I can't help it. Scowling, I sighed, and Kirino spoke again.

"Oh, right. I just remembered something."

"What? Is there something else?"

"Tomorrow my friends are coming over, so make sure to stay in your room, alright?"

What a thing to say.

Well… I guess I can tolerate that much. It seems reasonable that when a little sister's friends come over, she asks her brother to stay out of the way. So I'll do what my sister says, and that day I'll stay in my room…

Hm? Wait… wait wait wait wait.

"Y-you… you want me to play an eroge in my room while you have friends over?"

"Yeah."

"What kind of torture are you trying to put me through?! If they find out what I'm doing I won't be able to live down that embarrassment!"

To be seen by my sister's friends while I'm playing eroge would be nothing short of traumatic.

And if they don't take it well, I really would want to die.

"If it comes to that, I'll just pretend I don't know you, so it would be fine."

"This isn't about your embarrassment! Think about me ! If I get found out, then the shame might actually make me kill myself!"

Upon hearing my vehement protests, Kirino fell into deep thought while looking at me.

"If you wear headphones they shouldn't find out, right ?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about!"

This is why women are… I think any male junior high student in this country would agree with me that when trying to secretly watch videos, just wearing headphones doesn't necessarily lower the risk.

Certainly, earphones would cut the sound of the video, which would make you harder to detect. However, your sense of hearing is also cut from the outside world, so any impending entrances by your parents also become difficult to sense. So, the men of the world devised various schemes to deal with this, such as only wearing earphones in one ear.

Well, whatever. I'm not here to talk about that.

"My door doesn't lock, you know! If someone happens to open the door, that would be an instant strikeout, wouldn't it?! It's too dangerous!"

"… I see… you might be right… well, somehow or other think about it."

She finally seemed to come to realize what I was trying to say about how risky the entire thing was. Putting on a difficult expression, she nodded.

Seriously… sometimes she seems like such an airhead … and she also seems to be dead set on making me play this eroge. "Somehow or other think about it"… it's not like it's that simple.

"In any case… my friends are coming. If you're in the house, be sure to stay obediently in your room."

"….."

Kirino gestured to me like one would gesture to a dog to shoo him off. It seems that my sister really didn't want her friends to meet me… although, any little sister would probably think the same way.

Well, whatever. Whatever. I'm annoyed, but whatever. It's always been like this anyways.

I shrugged my shoulders and then spoke.

"Yeah yeah. I got it. Tomorrow, I should try my best not to leave my room, right?"

"Yes, exactly. Don't bother me in the evening either. A lot of cute girls are going to be coming, and if you talk to them I'll kill you. Looking at them is also forbidden, to keep them from being polluted."

"Don't talk about people as if they're germs!! Is there a reason to go that far?!"

And generally speaking…

"It's not like I'd be interested in any of your friends anyways."

"Hmph. Whatever."

As always, she looked at me as if I were garbage. I shuddered as I thought of how many of these people would be coming tomorrow.

Kirino's school friends were a group of the so called " girls of the highest order."

They were beautiful, refined, high class flowers. But Kirino's worry was a bit misplaced. I can't think of any reason for me to deliberately approach these girls who lived in a different world.

In my heart of hearts, those were my true feelings at this time.

"… Geez. What exactly is she trying to accomplish…?"

After that, I returned to my room, feeling irritated.

I was planning to take an afternoon nap, but after talking with my sister all the sleepiness had been stricken from my body, so now I was in no mood to sleep.

Sitting at my desk, I brought the laptop out of standby mode.

Umm… it doesn't matter which button I push, so I'll just push a button, right?

Lately, Kirino has been lending me her laptop very frequently, so I'm slowly becoming familiar with how to use it…

"……. Ooh."

For a minute, I felt as if something was slowly creeping up on me…

It probably was just my imagination.

For now, let's try using the Internet browser. (I don't know much about computers, but even I understand what an Internet browser is. And how to use one. It's just a piece of software that lets you view webpages, right?) I thought I would try checking out that "Siscali@Wiki" site that Kirino had mentioned. This would also be the first time I was using the Internet with this computer.

"Oh."

As soon as the browser opened up, I was greeted by a familiar site. It was homepage for the otaku SNS [5]

service Kirino had signed up for. The community Kirino was a member of, as well as the friends she had made through that community, were displayed on the screen. In the midst of those names, I found the two I had also met before, “Saori” and “Kuroneko.”

By the way, Kirino’s screenname was Kiririn@ just_a_while_ago_I_saw_the_markings_of_an_erogamer.

… That bastard. She must have updated that after our conversation. Does she have no concern for human dignity?

“… Tch.”

I can’t really dig much farther into this than I have already. Peeking at other people’s private things is wrong.

I clicked on the search bar on the upper half of the screen.

Hmm… what was it…? Ah, that’s right, Siscali… a space, and then wiki… now enter.

When I entered in and confirmed this information, I was able to easily find the “Siscali@wiki” page.

On the left hand side of the screen, a bunch of lined-up menu titles were visible (character names, special move names, etc.), and when I clicked on one of them the corresponding information would appear on the right side of the screen. It was an exceedingly simple way to organize a webpage.

"… Whoa… what is all this?"

I was astonished by the sheer amount of information on the site. This game hadn't been released that long ago, and yet there was already such detailed walkthrough information on the site…

Of course, there were details about the game's system, and there were walkthroughs for the campaign mode (with video links) and charts of all the skills in the game. There were also detailed walkthroughs of how to plan the growth of your character to maximize parameters, damage calculation formulae, and also a list of all endings and a scenario flowchart… I think. I'm not an expert at this stuff though.

Normally, I would only use the Internet from my cell phone to check the weather, so I had really underestimated the usefulness of these walkthrough sites .

From the day the game went on sale, people who had played the game to 100% completion had been constantly updating “Siscali@wiki” and filling out the database, so in a sense I guess it was natural that the site would be so detailed.

But, still, it was pretty amazing, I thought.

Only by liking the same eroge, people could collect those feelings and make such a top-quality database like this…

The same feelings that I had come into contact with a month before with that whole situation came to me once again from this site.

“… Hmm.”

A wry smile leaked out through the corners of my mouth.

… Geez… so this is what "otaku" are like… what a dedicated bunch.

Well, I guess this is what they called passion. And, of course, as far as the public was concerned, this stuff was pretty useless.

That's how it was.

"…….. Hm."

For a little while, I gazed at the screen…. but I didn't even know where to start. Even so, I could clearly tell from the site contents that the site was written in a style that was supposed to be easy to understand.

Still, the people who contributed to the site were probably core gamers, so how they viewed the game was probably a bit different from how genuine beginners like me did. So it would be pretty tough getting through all this. After comparing the Siscali instruction booklet to the site over and over again, I finally was able to somewhat understand the contents of the site.

Hmm. According to the site, Siscali's campaign mode has a pretty high degree of difficulty, so for super beginners like me, it would be pretty difficult to clear it.

"But, Kirino also cleared it."

She's also a beginner at fighting games, so if she can do it, there isn't any reason I shouldn't be able to do it as well.

… There has to be a way to do it…

I found a link on the side of the wiki page titled " Beginners Please Read," and clicked on it. Then, the right side of the screen was filled with walkthrough information for beginners.

There, I found the encouraging statements that I detail here.

Beginners Please Read – Campaign Mode Playthrough Instructions!

First, let's get those little sister's levels up quickly!

Siscali's online mode is divided into two large modes.

There is the Battle Mode, where all of the world's little sisters do battle, and aim to be the strongest.

There is also the Co-op Mode, where to prevent the destruction of the little sister's worlds, little sisters band together and complete various missions as a team.

(Some parts omitted)

In Co-op Mode, it is possible to use your save data even if you have not cleared the game.

If you are a beginner, then forge a strong character online, and tackle the campaign mode! Surely, you will soon be able to exact revenge on those you could not beat up until now!

- However, leeches are not welcome! Only accept missions that are suited to your level!

"Uhh… I can't make heads nor tails of this…"

I don't know what a "leech" player is, and saying it like it's an obvious concept doesn't help.

But, somehow or other, I had come to a bit of an understanding. Uhh… it's like this, right?

First of all… if I don't clear the offline mode (the one which had me looking at a game over screen multiple times), then I won't be able to play in the online battle mode.

In other words, as I was now, I couldn't do anything online except cooperate with other players and fight against computer opponents.

"… Why did they have to put in such annoying restrictions?"

Well, sure, it's probably true that people who haven't even been able to clear the campaign would have a hard time playing online… but that's a pretty high standard to hold people to.

Since, just like I had seen before, the campaign mode's degree of difficulty was certainly pretty high.

Was online gaming really like that? Well, whatever. So then, I had to get through the campaign mode…

First of all, in this Siscali game, when you repeatedly cleared the same missions you would get experience points, so that your character can get stronger by " leveling up."

Up to now, I didn't realize this, and just kept on trying to push forwards. That's why, no matter how many times I tried, I would lose to the same enemy. But, leveling up would also be easier in cooperative play online, it seemed.

"Hmm… so that's how it is."

Even though it was an eroge (Kirino would get angry if I said this though), they had still put so much into the gameplay portion. I thought that an eroge was, like the name suggests, a game in which all you do is do ero things… but I guess there are a lot of different types of eroge too.

I mean, for me, I really didn't see why they made this game into an eroge.

The “ero” part came when you defeated an enemy, and as a reward you would get those kinds of scenes… Honestly, I think they should cut out all that stuff and sell the game like that.

If people under the age of 18 can’t buy the game, then their customer base gets narrowed, right?

Well, maybe there are complicated factors that I just can’t see.

As I was using my beginner’s insight to ponder these issues…

“… Oh.”

The reference video I was looking at began to approach an ero-scene.

This was a video that was linked from the wiki page, and seemed to be a video explaining the basics of how to battle in Siscali, but the person who made the video, perhaps to tease the audience, had recorded part of the “ Reward CG” near the end of the video. [6]

… Ugh… dammit. As I thought, I really can't get used to this type of little sister ero…

Even though it's a game, watching the little sister character doing inappropriate things to the protagonist was depressing and mentally exhausting.

If I were to look at this from Kirino's perspective, I would separate the game from reality until the very end, would accept that just because I had a real little sister, that doesn't mean I can't enjoy a little sister game, and would be disgusted by the thought of thinking about two dimensional and three dimensional characters in the same way… but I really still don't know what I think about that line of reasoning.

The only thing I can really say is that I really can't do things I can't do. I can't play games in which you have to capture little sisters when I already have a real one. And I really don't want to watch scenes in which the little sister does inappropriate things.

Feeling truly awkward, I began to watch the HCG [7] sequence with the little sister character who had her clothes torn off and was collapsed on the ground, and – GAAH!

"Kyousuke – I'm going shopping, do you want medium spicy or-"

"Aaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Letting out a huge shout, I frantically clicked to the X button on the video player.

Krrchhh! My chair began to sway back and forth and creak from the disturbance. Upon turning around, I saw my mother standing in my open doorway, standing there vacantly. Speaking inarticulately, I began to babble incoherently.

"W-wha?! M-m-mom! K-knock next t-time!"

"Sooorry~~! I'll be extra careful next time. So, do you want medium spicy or extra spicy curry?"

"M-medium spicy!"

"Too baaaaad. Today, I'm in the mood for extra spicy. Alrighty, I'll go buy that now. Byeee~."

With a wide smile that seemed to be implying something, she closed the door.

"Ugh……"

Almost to the point of tears, I stretched. Dammit… how do I put it… dammit all!

That damn woman, whenever she has free time all she makes is curry…! In the first place, from the flow of events that just occurred, why the hell did she even ask for my opinion if she wasn't going to take it into account ?! Dammit, it really seems like in this household, the first-born son's opinion is just as valuable as a piece of garbage.

If they keep treating me like this, maybe I'll just go and join the Tamura household instead [8].

But also… I really cut it close with closing that window with the ecchi [9] scene, didn't I? Could it be… that she saw? It's not like I can go and ask her if she did …

Ugh… I'm just going to forget this ever happened to protect what self-dignity I have left.

Alright, I've forgotten already!

But seriously! Not having any kind of lock on my door is such a pain!

Honestly, I didn't really know how to deal with this…

As I pondered the many problems that middle and high school students faced today, I wearily stood up. Softly gazing downwards from my window, I made sure that my mother had left.

Alright, she left, right?"

Pulling myself together, I reopened the wiki page and once again began to read.

So… the remaining contents of the beginner's guide ran something like the following:

Second, be careful of the beginner killer "tentacle sister "! Otherwise, we will advise you on all the places where it is easy to make mistakes…

Third, here are easy instructions for which stats to level up. At the beginning, the parameters you should raise are…

Fourth, make good use of the first person view! If you learn to effectively switch between viewpoints, you will dominate 3D battles!

Fifth, a final way to success! Make sure to outfit your favorite little sister with your rarest items!

"Oh hoh. I see now…"

With renewed vigor, I eagerly nodded.

"I see now that I have no idea what's going on."

If the person writing the wiki article heard me, he would probably be heartbroken.

But I really just can't understand things that I don't understand. I can't help it. There's too many specialized terms in this.

Well, I guess one thing I did understand is that I should play online in the cooperative mode.

Skimming the beginner's guide page from start to finish, I closed the browser. Then, I clicked on the Siscali icon on my desktop, and started the game application.

The "Little Sister Wars – Siscalypse" menu appeared on my display.

"Ummm… is it this?"

While looking through the instruction manual I had on hand, I connected Siscali to the Internet. It seemed that Kirino had already configured the game for online play, since on the first click I was able to easily connect to a server.

Player "Kiririn" has been logged on.

"Huh?"

What's this? I had logged on with Kirino's screen name? Is it because she had configured it that way?

I'm not too sure what's going on, but it seemed as if I was able to connect, so whatever.

When I connected, I saw a bunch of borders that separated the screen into areas like notebook paper, with names like “Lobby Screen” and etc.

In a window in a corner on the right, I could also check the player data for “Kiririn.”

Hm. There were a bunch of English words and numbers displayed there… but the one thing I could understand at a quick glance was…

Win:003/Lose:046 [10]

So it was like this, was it? I couldn’t make heads or tails of the other ratios next to that one, but this one was probably her win-loss ratio. It was a count of the number of times “Kiririn” had won and lost in battle mode.

Hey, what is this, almost all of her matches have been losses…

“Uhh… what…?”

The separated sections on the display were all named some kind of “room,” and when I clicked on one, for example, something like this would show up:

”For expert players! This is the procrastination room! (Above ground only, no flying). Battle. Participants 1/2

”Beginner’s leveling-up room~. Cooperative Mission 02. Participants 2/3”

In this way, the information for each of the rooms was displayed. Players could enter in one of these rooms, or they could make a new room with their own conditions and rules.

I had heard that this type of online game system was relatively popular.

“… Umm… uhh… what exactly should I do…?”

With the lobby window in front of me, I scratched my cheek.

So, I should just choose a suitable room, enter it, start talking (I guess they would call it “chatting”) with other players, and start a cooperative game… but I stopped suddenly while choosing my first room.

I don't know why, but the thought of chatting with people I don't know and playing a game with them made me hesitate. Was it just me…?

Or maybe everyone felt like this the first time they played an online game. For me, although I can't say for sure… another factor was probably the emotional burden of having to play an eroge.

"… Uhh… maybe I should stop here today…"

I moved my mouse pointer to the logout button, and suddenly…

Ping! A light sound rang, and a small window appeared on the upper portion of the spring.

You have received a message from Saori-san.

"Huh?"

Recognizing the player name, I stared intently at the screen.

Saori was an otaku friend of Kirino's, and the manager of the "Otaku girls unite!" community. Last month, she

helped Kirino out a lot at the offline meet-up that Kirino had gone to.

… So, she plays Siscali too…? What a small world…

Well, no, this was probably a pretty popular game right now, even within her community.

Right now, there were more than ten thousand people connected to this Siscali server…

"Hm."

Unfortunately, I didn't have any exact figures for how well this game sold, but…

It's possible that this game sold absurdly well.

I mean, this type of thing isn't unusual, right? In this world, there were at least a few tens of thousands of erogamers who liked little sisters. I had always thought that my own little sister's hobby put her completely in a minority, but perhaps in the otaku community, she was actually in a majority?

Agh, wasn't this type of stuff a bit too popular?! This world is really this bizarre?!

Well, setting that aside, I turned back to the message that I had received.

”How do you do, Kiririn-san? If you have free time, would you like to talk?”

“She seriously seems like a different person online…”

Without thinking, I let a smile come to the surface.

This “Saori” acted like a “well-mannered lady” online, but irritatingly, what she was like in person was completely different. She was more than 180 centimeters tall, and her measurements were the same as those of Fujiwara Norika. [11]

She was a really weird girl, whose fashion sense and way of speaking all reeked of gross otaku.

Facing that Saori now, I…

“Umm…”

This was the first time I was chatting online, and even though I was a bit confused about speaking to someone in real time over the net, I made the following response:

"This isn't Kirino… sorry about that. This is her brother."

When I made that response, I received another message: Saori-san has sent you an invitation to a chatroom. When I clicked that message, a new chat window popped up.

Saori: Ah, if it isn't Kyousuke-oniisama [12]. It's been quite a while since we last talked. [13]

When I thought about who was typing this, it honestly felt a bit lame. Who the hell was she calling "oniisama"?

Kiririn: Who the hell is Kyousuke (凶)? My name is Kyousuke (), dammit. Kousaka Kyousuke ().

I hadn't told her what kanji my name was written with , so it can't be helped that she made a mistake. But why exactly did she have to choose that kanji…?

Because she thinks I'm miserable, doesn't she?! As I was thinking this, Saori sent back a reply: How are you doing?

Trying to keep up with the conversation, I began typing.

Kiririn: I'm alright. You seem to be as lively as usual. Thanks for always helping my sister out.

Saori: No no. I should thank Kiririn-san as well for always helping me out. Lately she's been losing to me constantly in this game, and because of that, I can keep my win percentage above 80%.

So the "Lose: 046" thing was her doing, was it?! Dammit, because of her, I have to…

As my forehead twitched in annoyance, I typed a response.

Kiririn: Hmph. You're pretty good at games, aren't you?

Saori: Well, I guess you could say that…

Oh really?

Kiririn: Well, I was wondering if you could give me a few pointers. I mean, my sister is forcing me to play this

game… so I was thinking that I should get good at this game and then crush her.

Saori: Eh heh heh. You two are certainly getting along well. It makes me jealous.

… It was nothing like that. What the hell is she saying?

Saori: Have you read the Beginner's Tips page on the " Siscali@Wiki" site?

Kiririn: Yeah, just now actually. But I couldn't make heads or tails of it… especially… what was it? It was saying things like I should make good use of first person view or something. Well, I mean, I guess I understand what they were trying to say… but… well…

Saori: Ah, could it be that you're getting a case of 3D drunkenness?

Kiririn: 3D drunkenness?

Saori: It's what we call a sick feeling, like carsickness, that can happen when you play 3D games. You can easily get this feeling especially in FPS – that is, games played from first person view.

Kiririn: Ah, if you put it that way, that might be it. Yeah, perhaps that's it…

I agreed with what Saori had said. When I played 3D games, it definitely felt like I was a bit dizzy.

That's probably why I haven't been able to get any better at the game at all.

Kiririn: You sound like you know a lot about this stuff, don't you?

Saori: I was the same way when I started playing. But if you practice, then at least to some extent you can get better at it, you know?

Kiririn: Practice? How?

Saori: For example, how about you live your real life like an FPS game? Walk around regularly with an assault rifle, and keep your head straight forwards. [14] And if you want to change direction, turn your entire body at right angles.

And then, if you see anybody within your enemy search area, regardless of whether or they're friend or foe , quickly aim at them while moving into a crouched

position. Like this, I was able to completely cure my problem!

Kiririn: Only a complete weirdo would do something like that! I don't want to go that far to fix this!

But seriously, she did that?! Geez, I had completely forgotten that this person was seriously like this!

She might sound like a lady, but she really was an extremely bizarre person!

Saori: Complete weirdo… Kyousuke-oniisama, that's quite rude. I already told you once before, didn't I? That normally, I'm quite an obedient girl.

Kiririn: An obedient girl wouldn't do something like point guns at people on the street! That's definitely something only you believe! And it's not like the people around you would say anything bad about it to your face , so at least reflect on how people around you were reacting to you!

For example, how would her friends feel if she aimed an assault rifle at them?!

Saori: Well, they completely understood, actually. " Phew… I'm glad. This hobby's much better than the last one," they said.

Kiririn: Is that something they really can just accept like that?! What the hell did you do before that?!

And so our exchanges continued like this for a while. Even though this was pretty much my first time chatting online, I had already gotten so worked up…

Well, however you look at it, this girl can be really good at getting people riled up. Just by being there, she could get people excited. She was the so-called "mood maker."

While I was thinking about these things, I dangled my wrists in front of me. Because I had been typing so quickly, they were very tired.

"Phew…"

I paused. Meanwhile, Saori continued talking nonstop. However, I really couldn't keep up with her high-paced talk.

Saori: Kyousuke-oniisama? Why aren't you talking?

Because my fingers are tired. Just wait a bit, please.

Saori: Ah, is this what they call the silent treatment?

Kiririn: It's because my fingers hurt after having to type out so many responses to your ridiculousness, dammit!

She really doesn't know what it means when she's ignored, does she?!

As I put on a bitter expression, Saori changed the subject with a "Well, anyways…"

Saori: If you want, I'll give you a detailed walkthrough for Siscali over the phone. My cell number is…

And then she gave me her number.

After training hard with Saori, as I expected, I was able to get better at the game. Although, that girl now knew my cell phone number…

Little did I know that I would soon come to regret this.

It was the following day, a Sunday.

Having finished my lunch, I was lounging in the living room and watching TV, when with a Ding dong! the intercom rang. After a short pause, it rang again. Ding dong! It didn't seem like anybody was going to answer it.

My father worked even on the holidays. My mother had gone off somewhere with the other women of the neighborhood.

Right now, there shouldn't be any people in this house other than me and Kirino.

"Agh… dammit. Hold on…"

I began to lift myself up from the sofa, but I heard the tap tap tap of someone coming down the stairs. And then ..

"Just a second! I'll be right there!"

It was an overly sweet voice that I was sure would never be directed at me. I couldn't believe that such a voice was coming out of the mouth of my little sister.

"…"

Oh right… today my sister's friends were coming over to play.

I sunk back into the same sofa I was lifting myself up from just a minute before. I casually watched the entryway.

Finally, I heard "sorry for intruding!" [15] and could vaguely see the forms of a number of female students passing through the now open doorway.

Ton ton ton ton. I heard the sounds of them going up the stairs.

It seemed that Kirino had invited her friends into her own room on the second floor. At some point, the TV program I had been watching had ended, so I powered down the TV with the remote, lay down on the sofa, and began to read the weekly manga magazine.

Whatever. She can invite over anyone she wants, it doesn't concern me.

That's what I thought, but…

"Dammit… I can't concentrate."

Even after reading one of the books, I couldn't for the life of me remember what I had just read. What was happening above me kept on bothering me, and I found myself constantly glancing upwards to the ceiling.

My sisters friends had come over… this might be the first time this has happened since she entered junior high , but it's not like she's never had friends over before.

Yeah. So why is this bothering me so much this time?

It's probably because I knew her secret. Also, her getting exposed to our parents and my having to go through a great deal of trouble to deal with it was still fresh in my mind.

Yeah, that was it.

In her room, she had hidden a large quantity of eroge and other otaku goods.

If her friends found that stuff, then the situation may be even worse than when our parents found out about it …

Well, whatever, it's not like I'm worried about her or anything.

I really don't care what she does or what becomes of her. So honestly, none of this has anything to do with me.

It's just that… well, I mean… it would be annoying if things spiraled out of control right before the exam period.

So ultimately, I was just worried for myself.

"After all, she can be strangely clumsy…"

Will she really be alright?

As I was thinking these chivalrous thoughts, Kirino came into the living room.

My little sister today was wearing some kind of baggy shirt, a super-short skirt, and socks that rose up above her knee. I didn't know much about fashion, so because my sister always dresses in the latest fashions and styles, there was a lot I didn't understand…

But, I could see that she was dressed very fashionably. At the very least, there was no mistaking that. And, what exactly is Ms. Teen Model coming down here to do…?

Well, it appears that she had come down to bring up a few drinks and sweets for her friends.

Why is it that she never takes care of me like that?

"…. Gross. What are you looking at? And why exactly are you here anyways? Didn't I tell you yesterday to stay obediently in your room?"

"… Shut up. I'm watching TV. Go away."

"Huh? You're not watching anything. Don't lie to me. You were reading manga."

Argh, so annoying. Daring to ignore my sister, I turned the TV on with the remote.

The TV turned right onto a news program. "… the woman was electrocuted after being shot with an illegally modified stun gun. In the suspect's room, among other things, a number of adult manga were found, and also…" As the pointless information rambled on and on, I felt more and more annoyed.

Come on, go away, you. Go somewhere else, already. In my mind, I drove my sister away.

"Seriously, you're being a bother. We're going to come down to eat sweets here. Come on, I told you, get out right now."

What a way to treat someone. Who the hell do you think I am?

"Tch… I got it, I got it. You'll be happy if I leave, right? If I leave. Fine, fine, your troublesome brother will return to his room."

Reluctantly obeying Kirino, I couldn't help but think about how kind I was being.

Kirino, don't you have anything to say to your amazing older brother?

"It's pretty dirty around here, so clean the room before you go."

That's not what I wanted to hear!

In the end, I helped clean the living room, made iced coffee for Kirino's friends, and afterwards I was driven out and begrudgingly returned to my own room.

Now, what should I do? The end of term exams were close at hand, so I really have to study, but I really just didn't have the motivation. The more the test approached, the more my motivation waned. That was a natural law of this world that I could not go against. As I was thinking up these excuses, I sat at my desk.

"Umm… so I do it like this."

As clumsy as always, I woke the laptop up from standby mode.

I started the Internet browser. Of course, it's not like I was planning to put on a pair of headphones and start playing eroge, but if all I did was browse the Internet, then even if the door suddenly opened, it wouldn't be a big deal.

Resting my chin in my hands, with a sleepy expression , I clicked around and read a few news stories.

But really, and I've realized this recently, this "Internet " thing seriously doesn't agree with me.

"…… haaaah…."

Resting and almost falling back asleep, I let a feeling of laziness wash over me. Hm, this doesn't feel bad at all.

As I rested, time still mercilessly marched forwards, but I didn't notice.

Ahhhh… boooored… isn't there something to do?

This is probably what most people feel like when they're wasting their time online.

After all, it wasn't exactly an activity that required deep thought. Soon, I grew tired of just sluggishly clicking on random links, and felt like searching for something to do.

You might think that if I feel this way, I should just go study. Ah, but that's impossible. I don't have a reason for it… it's just impossible.

So, with that plan in mind, while swishing my mouse cursor to and fro above the Google icon, I thought about what to do.

After indulging in my lazy stupor for a while, the face of my bespectacled childhood friend popped up in my mind for some reason. With her quite familiar plain face and loose smile.

It seems that her face comes up often when I'm thinking without any specific goal in mind.

This was probably because, to put it simply, she was my best friend and was the friend who has been with me the longest.

Now that I think about it, she had said something a while ago…

"… Kyou-chan, Kyou-chan, guess what? I'm collecting pillows right now. And, a while ago, I went with my entire family to the department store, right? And in the place where they sell bedding, I found an interesting pillow. It's soft and feels really nice… but when you take your hand off of the pillow it returns to its original shape …"

I'm pretty sure that at that time, I was only really half listening to my childhood friend's story.

"Hmm, so, what kind of pillow was it?" I responded casually. But she didn't take offence to my nonchalance. Rather, she seemed strangely happy as she tried to find a response.

"… Umm… Uhh… te-te-tenpu…. tenpu…?"

What was she trying to say…? Probably, from how stiffly she was speaking, these were English words, which she's always had problems saying. Tenpu… pillow?

"Hm."

Well, let's see if we can't look more into this….umm… let's search for "pillow" then.

Click. Upon entering my search request, Google displayed the following search results:

Pillow search results. Approximately 43,800,800 results . Showing results 1-10 (0.16 seconds).

Idiot! How can I look through all that?!

One, two, three, four… forty three million results?! Are you making fun of me or something?!

No, no, of course Google was just doing what it was programmed to do, so it's my fault for using such a generic search term.

But, anyone who's using this kind of thing for the first time definitely would think the same way!

Hmph. Pulling myself together, I took another look at the search results. Ten results for my search of "pillow" were displayed on the screen. There were links to sites like "Happy Market," sites to composite sites about pillows, a link to the Wikipedia page on pillows… but either way it seemed that I wouldn't find what I was looking for like this. So then…

I decided to make my search keyword more specific. Pillow, a single space, feels nice, single space, tenpu… and then I hit the enter key.

"Dammit… That didn't work at all…"

Not a single search result came up. Well, I guess there's no helping going back and looking over the original search results then. After all, I'm just trying to kill time, so even if I can't find anything I don't mind. For a while I browsed through those results, following up on a few

links, searching for words that were close to what I was looking for. At long last, I came upon a certain site.

It appeared like a site that specialized in selling character goods. How exactly did I end up here when I was doing a search for pillows…?

Well, it seems like they were selling character pillows here.

"Hm? What's this?"

Looking at the picture of the product, for a second I honestly didn't think it was a pillow. Rather, it looked like a long, thin cushion on which an illustration of a girl had been printed.

The item description ran like this:

Super popular item! Stardust Witch Meruru's "Red Star Meru" has arrived with a slightly ecchi [16] hug pillow cover.

- The product image is a sample

… Wh-what…? Why would anybody want an illustration on their pillow like that…?

To think that something as mismatched as this would exist in this world…

But, to call it a "super popular item"… seriously? These things actually can sell…?

W-well… I really don't think there are people who would actually sleep with these huge pillows, so it's probably just because people really like this character and so there will always be demand for collector's items like this…

But either way, the otaku marketplace completely rose above the limits of my understanding and imagination.

But… I've definitely felt this atmosphere before!

It was the same atmosphere I felt when I was dragged around Akiba by those three.

"Umm…"

But either way I looked at it, what I was looking for was not here. H-hmph, what's with these hug pillows…

I immediately clicked the back button on my browser, returning all the way to the search results where I had clicked on the image before.

Putting in a different word into the search window, I turned my gaze away from the image, and…

Click.

Upon clicking, Google spit back a question at me in relation to the word I had typed.

Did you mean "glasses moe"? [17]

"What the… what is this?!"

Completely surprised, I rattled my chair, causing it to creak.

… Dammit. Google said something I completely don't understand.

What word did I search for, you ask? Well, it doesn't matter.

"Ugh, that surprised me. Even though it's just a search engine…"

When I looked at the clock, I saw that an hour had passed.

Huh?! How did time go by that fast?! Amazed, I glared at the clock, but of course, the time that had passed was not returned to me.

This is bad… so, this is the power of the Internet…

Scary……. It's like the Internet stole part of my life from me.

"Haah…"

Sitting in the chair, I stretched my entire body.

My body felt as if I had just spent a while intensely studying.

This may have been the first time I've witnessed the deep ravine that can take hold of and refuse to let go of

computer users. I probably shouldn't get too involved with this all for my own health… As I thought about this all, I felt a bit chilled.

And then…

"Hm?"

If I paid attention, I could faintly hear the sounds of excited chattering coming from across the wall. It seemed that at some point, the girls had come back up from the living room and had moved into the room next door.

The walls of this house were relatively thin, so if you were too loud, your voice could be heard in the next room… normally, we would be careful about this, so it never became a problem.

But today her friends had come over… so she probably wasn't being that careful.

"……"

With a strange expression, I stared at the wall. Hm. Once I realized I could hear them, I couldn't get that fact out of my head.

Suddenly, I could hear Kirino's voice especially clearly across the wall as she raised her voice.

"I said, there's nobody like that, geez~~!"

"You're lying~~. Then, let me see your cell phone."

"N-no. I won't do that. That's a violation of privacy…!"

It seems that her friends were interrogating her, and Kirino was resisting their questions desperately.

I don't know what she meant by "nobody like that," but in her cell phone there were photos of her with a certain Gothic Lolita friend and a certain huge otaku girl, and also plenty of evidence in the form of mail she's sent other people about otaku things [18]. There was no way she could show that stuff to her school friends.

"… That's pretty suspicious… Kirinoo~… come on, you can tell us…"

What in the world are these people talking about? And with such loud voices…

Fully knowing I was doing something inappropriate, I strained my ears and tried to listen to more.

"H-hmph… tell you… tell you what?"

"You're still playing dumb! Come on, come ooon~! Kirinoo~~, what kind of guy is he?"

Huh? What did she just say? I feel like I just heard something really strange.

Raising my eyebrows, I awaited Kirino's response.

"Like I said!! I don't have a boyfriend!!"

Whaaaaaaaaaaaa?!

So, this stuff… this stuff they were talking about was…

"You're lying! I can't believe that! You definitely have a guy! It's alright, it's not like we're going to steal him, right? So come on, just tell us~~!"

"I-I said there wasn't one! How many times are you going to make me say it?!"

W-wait just a second! Kirino has a boyfriend? That's a lie, isn't it?!

Where was this saint?! Was he a god? He was a god, wasn't he?

My eyes open wide, I shook my head in disbelief. In my seventeen years of existence, this was the biggest shock I've experienced. I mean, I was more surprised now than I had been when I first saw Saori-san's body in person!

I couldn't see how anybody could be her boyfriend. No boy's spirit could stand being in a relationship with that kind of person.

But the girls on the other side of the wall did not seem to agree with me.

"Huh? But Kirino, at school you're really popular with the boys, you know."

"Uhh, uhhh! That might be true, but…!"

Is that so…? Well, she is cute when she doesn't open her mouth. She probably doesn't let her true nature out at school anyways… so there may be boys that have been tricked by her little act.

But, wait… maybe in front of a guy she likes, she would be surprisingly pleasant.

Pulling back her rebellious nature, and acting like a perfect girlfriend… I tried to imagine it.

"Ugh."

I felt sick to the stomach. Oogh. I'm not joking at all. The very thought of that sickened me.

"Come on. It's not like you've ever seen me together with a guy. So then, why exactly are you saying stuff like this? That I have a b-boyfriend?"

"Because lately you've been acting weird, Kirino!" said friend A.

"Yeah, I agree! Really strangely!" said friend B. And, in response…

"Huuh? I don't believe you… w-where have I been acting strange? I-I haven't been acting strange at all!"

What? That definitely didn't sound like my sister talking. I was taken aback by how weak she was acting.

As I had thought, she was really putting on a huge nice act. But seriously, why do all junior high girls have to end their sentences in such stupid ways? [19]

Then, Kirino's friends began to speak again.

"Lately, you haven't been socializing as much, and I always see you texting someone on your phone at school ~."

"…."

Judging by how Kirino wasn't responding, she probably knew what they were talking about. Well, what next?

"Ah, I saw you talking on your phone too! It sounded like you were having a lover's quarrel or something!"

"L-lover's quarrel? What?"

Kirino didn't sound like she was feigning innocence. It seemed like she honestly didn't know what they were talking about.

"I mean, it sounded like you were yelling at each other or something, but you looked happy. And then after hanging up you had this smile on your face. That's definitely your boyfriend, isn't it?"

"Yeah, isn't it?"

"No, that was, you're w-wrong… uhh… I mean…"

Kirino was clearly flustered.

I-I see… I think I know what was going on now… I think I know all too well…

"Ah, see? You know what we're talking about, don't you?"

"N-no! I really don't!"

Kirino continued to stubbornly deny all of it. …This girl was seriously bad at lying.

She might as well have told them "yeah, I have one," the way she was denying it.

And yes, I definitely knew what they were talking about all too well. The reason Kirino had been less social lately. The person Kirino constantly mailed at school. The person she was having the lover's quarrel with – I knew all of this.

It's because, lately, she's been hanging out and playing with her otaku friends. And her friends had confused her behavior for her getting a boyfriend… well, whatever. It' s pretty natural that they wouldn't be able to imagine the academic exemplar, sports prodigy, teen magazine model Kousaka Kirino being caught up in eroge and anime, and going out with her otaku friends to offline meetings.

"Hmm? Are you going to deny you have a boyfriend to the very end?"

"Of course I am!"

"Well, then could you tell us why you've been acting strange lately?"

This girl who's been talking with Kirino is really pushing some sensitive buttons here.

That's what I was thinking when, as I expected, Kirino exploded.

"Ahhh, come on, leave it alone!"

She exploded, but in a way that seemed uncomfortably unlike her.

Because, I mean, I can't imagine an angry Kirino saying something like "Ahhh, come on, leave it alone!"

If it was the usual Kirino, with a voice a million times scarier, she would be yelling "Die!" or "Shut up!"

But the Kirino here, the Kirino who was pretending to be nice, used an incredibly cute, coaxing voice to deal with her friends.

"I already said it before, I really don't have a boyfriend ."

"Really…? Honestly though, we're just worried about y- ow! You don't need to hit me, Kirino!"

For a second, I thought that Kirino had lost her cool and had sent one of her friends flying, and that sent chills down my spine. But then…

"Nooooo~~! Come onnn~~! It hurts, I said~~!"

It seems my worry was completely unnecessary. There 's no way they should be able to keep talking so lightly after getting hit by Kirino.

It seemed that while Kirino was hitting her friends, she repeatedly called out "I'm angry now!"

"If you don't reflect on your actions, I'll never forgive you, you know!"

"Really? Agh…"

… strange. Way too strange… Disgustingly strange! Agh, I can feel goosebumps forming…!

I couldn't stop myself from trembling in fear at this strange Kirino who was actually acting like a pleasant person.

"W-well… Kirino, we'll stop asking about it. I'll reflect on my actions too, see!"

This attempt to calm Kirino down came from a voice I had not heard before.

"Hm, what should I do, I wonder? I suppose if you stop questioning me, I'll forgive you…"

I couldn't hear their responses all the way over here, but I could guess that everyone was nodding and agreeing.

The same voice that had calmed Kirino before spoke up again. It seemed like she was trying to change the subject.

"Hey, by the way. Kirino, you have a brother, right? I never knew."

I affixed my ears to the wall, and can anyone really blame me?

Now completely interested in the conversation, I strained my ears.

"Uh… and?"

"Why do you look so unhappy? He seems like a nice person."

"Huh?"

What kind of answer was that? She was praising your brother, and you just respond with a "Huh?"… that's pretty cruel.

But what came out of Kirino's mouth next was far from praise.

"You should go see an eye doctor… your eyes are broken or something."

"I-I don't think they are… probably."

Probably, she says. It's nice that she stood up for me, but it seems that she lacked confidence.

Slightly downhearted, another friend joined in on my evaluation.

"I saw him too! I only got a glance at him though. Kirino, he really doesn't resemble you at all!"

Shut up, bastard. Leave me alone. I already know that, I don't need you saying that to me.

"In fact, he seems rather plain…"

"Haha, you can say that again. How should I put it… ah, I got it I got it. I can see him ten years later working at some gloomy plain small company, being a sectional manager or something."

"Whaa, that's so complicated… but I know where you're coming from. That face definitely gives off that impression."

Ahahahaha. I heard them laughing together.

… Junior high school girls have pretty nasty mouths, don't they… the last thing I wanted is to hear myself being criticized by my sister's friends.

Even though I would be the first to admit that I do look quite plain…

But I don't like that you're making fun of me with this "sectional manager of a small company" thing.

Agh… how depressing…

"Huh? Kirino… why are you being so quiet?"

"… No reason?"

After that, Kirino spent a while longer in the room cracking jokes about me.

… They kept up with the selfish, unreasonable comments. Maybe I should just storm in and yell at them.

I felt offended, something I almost never felt, but even then I couldn't just go over and knock down the door.

After all, I was a cowardly good-for-nothing. My sister 's friends had already said all they wanted to say, so there was no helping it… that was it. There was no other reason to do anything.

And plus, I didn't want to cause some strange misunderstanding.

Not wanting to hear any more of their unpleasant conversation, I softly moved down to the first floor.

They probably won't come back down to the first floor again, right…?

When I opened the refrigerator, I saw that there was still some cola left over after Kirino had prepared some for her friends, so I gladly drank it down.

"Ahhh."

As I let out a breath, Ding Dong!, the intercom rang.

… Was it another one of Kirino's friends who had come late?

Naturally, that's what I thought, but I still moved towards the entranceway to see who it was.

"Kousaka-saaaan. Express home delivery."

"Ah, yes! Yes yes, hold on one second."

Hurriedly, I opened the door. A deliveryman stood there smiling, holding a cardboard box. At his request, I signed for and received the package.

"Thank you very much!"

He energetically bowed his head, and returned to his car.

And then…

In my arms only the cardboard box was left. The package was as thick as a stack of four or five weekly manga magazines, but wasn't that big or that heavy. At most, it was one or two kilograms.

"Hm…"

What exactly is this? I don't have any idea… it's probably for my mother or father or maybe my sister, but … When I took a look at the shipping slip, the recipient's name was "Kousaka Kyousuke-sama."

"Huh? For me?"

I scrutinized the package shipping slip once again. The sender's name was a girl's name that I didn't recognize, and the contents of the package were labeled as " cosmetics."

What…?

Why am I getting cosmetics from a girl I don't know? I have no idea what's going on.

Completely stumped, I leaned my head to one side.

Well, it's no use to just continue thinking about this here. Just as I thought that, Kirino began to come down the stairs.

She probably also heard the intercom ring. She seemed displeased, and began to speak.

"Y-you came out of your room. So? What's that box?"

"I don't know."

"Huh? What the h-"

Suddenly, Kirino's expression changed to one of surprise. "Ah! That design…"

"Hm? As I thought, this is yours, isn't it? But my name is on the label… hey!"

Frantically, Kirino finished descending the stairs, and quickly snatched the cardboard box from my hands. She spoke up, sounding happy.

"It's an "Etana" box! What is it what is it? What could it be?"

Kirino looked at me with an expression filled with both confusion and hope.

"Huh? What? This… is for me?"

"What? Ah, no…"

"Amazing! Even I haven't been able to get one of these !"

I didn't know exactly what was going on, but it seemed like a misunderstanding was starting to form. For some reason, she thinks that this is a present for her from me. Come to your senses, Kirino, why would I be sending you cosmetics as a gift?

"Well, I guess I can't help it then. Go ahead and take it. "

Any motivation I may have had to clear up the misunderstanding had evaporated… I guess "Etana" was the name of the maker. On the box, in English, was written "Eternal Blue" or something.

From how happy Kirino seemed to be about it, it was probably a high-quality product. I don't know for sure though.

But, honestly, is it really alright for us to open this? It wasn't something that Kirino had ordered, and I still don 't know why this package would be addressed to me.

It's not like I thought it was a bomb or something… it was probably just some mistake…

"But this… this just came out this year! You were so clumsy earlier that I got so mad, but I guess now we're even!"

"No, that wasn't- h-hey!"

After her strange, arrogant statement, before I could say anything, Kirino ran back upstairs with the mysterious cardboard box.

She was angry but is going to forgive me? I was so clumsy…? What the hell is she talking about?

… Geez, even though I didn't say a single word back there…

And then…

The cell phone I had stuffed into my back pocket began to vibrate.

Huh, who is it? It was an unlisted number, and I took the call, puzzled.

“Y-yes, this is Kousaka…”

“… Kyousuke-san?”

I could hear a calm female voice coming from the other end of the line.

W-who was this?

I didn’t know any girl who would call me “ Kyousuke-san.” Puzzled, I asked for her identity.

“Umm… who’s calling?”

“Hm? Ahh…”

Seemingly satisfied, my conversation partner took a long breath, and answered.

"Ah, sorry for bothering you. Kyousuke-shi! This is Saori!" [20]

"Wha-"

Her voice had suddenly gotten much louder, so I was surprised.

"Uh, you're… that 'Saori'?"

Now that I think about it, because I had phoned her yesterday, she also knew my number as a consequence.

"Fufufu, Kyousuke-shi, do you really know that many other people named 'Saori'? I didn't know that. Or should I say, maybe you found a sweeter, prettier, glasses-wearing 'Saori'?"

"In the first place, I only know one 'Saori' that ends her sentences with 'gozaru.'" [21]

"Indeed! Haha, oh no, you're making me blush."

"That wasn't a compliment! But in any case, what do you want with me?"

"Hey hey Kyousuke-shi. That's not the tone you should take towards a girl who calls you on a holiday. Are you telling me that I need a reason to call you?"

Well, she told me, I guess. I'll reconsider my tone.

"So, did the package I sent to Kyousuke-shi properly reach you?"

Well, at least that I could make sense of. That package from an unknown female sender… and I guess it wouldn't make sense if she used her screen-name to send the package.

"… You mean… could you mean that cosmetics box that I got?"

"Yeah, that one. I'm glad that it seems to have reached you safely. Truth is, I know Kiririn-shi's address and phone number, but I never had asked for her real name… "

"And so that's why you sent this to me."

Now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever heard Saori call Kirino by her real name once.

Hm. It's strange to think of friends not knowing each other's real names… but I guess that's what often happens with people who meet online. Well, if they can get along well regardless, it's not like this is a bad thing.

"I've already passed it on to Kirino. She seemed really happy about it. I don't know what's going on, but thank you."

"Ah, then that's great," Saori responded graciously.

… She really is a good person, isn't she? Even if she's really weird.

"But is it really alright, for her to get those cosmetics… ? Weren't they expensive?"

For something to make Kirino happy like that, I would imagine that it would have to be pretty expensive.

"… Hm, it seems that there's been a misunderstanding , Kyousuke-shi."

"What?"

"I agree that's the box I received after I bought an expensive cosmetics set from overseas… but the contents of that box now are completely different."

"……"

Um, what did she just say? Is she saying that the contents of the box were not cosmetics…?

"So, what's in the box then?"

I tried to ask as casually as I could.

And she responded just as casually.

"Among other things, a set of doujinshi [22] from Meruru and Siscali."

"Wai-"

Speechless, I almost let my phone drop to the floor. I could instantly tell that this was a dangerous situation. W-wait. Wait wait, calm down…!

Despite how angry I felt on the inside, I tried to ask my next question with a calm voice.

"Ero stuff?"

"Some of it, yes."

I quickly looked up to the top of the stairs. I gulped.

As I did that, the phone call continued.

"Kiririn-shi had asked me before to look for these things, and just recently I was able to get my hands on them. There are some Siscali books I bought at a recent event, and also a handmaid walkthrough guide for Kyousuke-shi. I sent it out as soon as I could yesterday… ah, also, there are some bed sheets too in there. Fufufu… you don't need to thank me at all. After all, we're friends, aren't we?"

Calm down… mustering all my strength, I collected myself and quelled the feelings of rage that were welling up.

This was not the right time to be blowing up at her.

"Sorry, something urgent came up! I'll call you back!"

Click. Cutting off the phone call, I put my cell phone away.

"Arrgh, this is really bad!!"

That idiot Saori! What terrible timing to be sending us this bomb!

That bastard… putting this stuff in a cosmetics box and writing cosmetics on the shipping slip is probably just her own way of camouflaging the contents… but this time it was completely counterproductive!

After all, junior high school girls were really into cosmetics…

If she opened that box in front of her classmates, this situation would get really bad really fast! Agh, dammit! What should I do?! This is really serious! And what the hell did she mean by bed sheets? If it's also in the same box, then I can't imagine it's anything good!

And then, I remembered the description of the " illustrated hug pillow" I had seen online the other day.

Could… could it be… that the bed sheets were…

Aaaaaaggghhhh! That had to be it! Don't open it just yet, Kirino~~~!!!

Completely panicked, I rushed up the stairs towards my sister's room.

Without thinking, I turned the doorknob. Luckily, it wasn't locked, so it easily opened.

"Kirino!"

"!"

Stumbling into the room, I quickly looked around. It was a room that gave off a strange, sweet smell. The smell was stronger than it was the other times I've come into this room.

In the 8-tatami large room, there were four junior high girls, Kirino included. Kirino was sitting at her study desk, two others were sitting on a cat cushion on the floor, and the last one was sitting on the bed.

And then… happily, I noticed that Pandora's Box had yet to be opened.

The cardboard box sat in the middle of the room on the floor, and one of Kirino's friends was trying to peel off the duct tape with which the package had been sealed with her nails.

Cold sweat stuck to my forehead as the girls collectively affixed their stares to the rude fellow that had just barged into the room without permission. They were of all shapes and sizes, but they definitely looked like Kirino's friends. That is, they were all really cute girls, and… agh, this isn't the time to be thinking about this!

Kirino stood up fiercely from her chair.

"What the hell?! Why are you barging in here so suddenly?!"

What a horrifying look she was giving me.

"Um… well… that is… uhh…"

Why are you looking at me like I'm a fly or something when I'm trying so hard to help you?!

Dammit, if she chases me out now, she's making a huge mistake! Although, she doesn't know that yet. Seriously, why am I trying to protect her public image anyways?! Geez, it's not like I'm getting anything out of this.

"I'm sorry about coming in so suddenly. Really sorry. Uhh… there's been a bit of a slipup…"

Putting on a forced smile, I began to shorten the distance between me and the package.

But, Kirino blocked my advance vigorously.

"Huh? Slipup? Whatever, just get out. Hurry. Right now."

Kirino crossed the room and came right up to me, and tried to push me out with both her hands.

"H-hey, wait a second… come on! Listen to me…"

"Shut up! I told you to get out!"

She was completely unapproachable. Although, for Kirino, this was the natural way to react to my intrusion. After all, she hated me, and thought of me as something akin to vermin. What's more, thinking about the conversation I had heard before, these junior high girls didn't exactly have great opinions of me either.

So I understand that she may not want me to come into contact with her friends, even for a second. I understand, but…

"Seriously… listen to me for a second! Just for a second! I'll leave right after, I swear…!"

Not even letting up her pushing by a bit, Kirino screamed "What is it?!"

"It's the box, the box… the box you snatched out of my arms a little bit ago. Give it back to me!"

"Huh? You came in here just to tell me that?! You already gave it to me! I don't get it! Just get out!"

While she was saying this, she continued to attempt to push me out of the room. Irritated, I scowled.

There wasn't even a bit of room for me to offer an explanation.

"…"

Come on! Realize what I'm trying to do, Kirino…! There's ero doujinshi in that box over there…!

(By the way, I only knew what doujinshi was because of that other day when those girls dragged me around Akiba. Taking me to ero bookshops… it was torture.)

"Don't look at me! Gross!"

I've seen TV shows where siblings have almost telepathic like powers in trying to understand each other, but that was obviously a lie.

She honestly didn't understand anything I was trying to say.

There's no helping it, so I have to be a bit more forceful here.

"Ugh… sorry!"

Shaking off Kirino's hand a bit forcefully, I grabbed both her arms and neatly reversed our positions.

I was expecting an immediate counterattack from my sister, but at the very least, it didn't come immediately.

"Hya!" She gave of a girly shriek and held herself. I only touched your arm, geez! Don't respond in such a weird way!

Well, whatever. That wasn't important right now. For now, I had to deal with my primary objective.

Where is that thing?!

When I looked in the direction of the box, I saw Kirino's three friends sitting near the bed, staring blankly at me. One of her friends, the short one, was sitting right in front of the package. It was the same girl who was trying to pick off the tape before. I faced her and raised my palm.

"U-umm… can you let me through?"

When I pointed towards the box, the girl swiftly hid the box behind her back in her hands.

A teasing smile appeared on her face.

"Ehehe."

Th-this bastard! She really knows how to piss me off…!

And also, wasn't this the same girl who was badmouthing me in this room before?!

Freezing a smile in place on my face, I could feel veins of annoyance popping up on my temple.

"Hahaha, stop joking around."

As I gave off a dry laugh, I again reached out my hand .

Stepping back, the girl began to run towards the bed.

I began to ran after her, reaching out my hands, when …

Suddenly, Kirino caught my collar.

"Stop screwing around! My friends came over to play, so why can't you be a bit less annoying?!"

Scary! With a glare that put my father's to shame, she pierced through both my eyes.

As an invader of the girls' sacred space, I felt like I was about to be given the death penalty.

She was seriously, seriously angry. Well, I would probably be angry in her position too, so I can't blame her. But, come on… I'm not trying to be annoying here.

It's not like I'm doing this for her. It's just that I never ever start something that I don't finish. After I gave you life advice, after I was beaten by our father, after I was forced to play an eroge… after I suffered through all that and was able to make a bit of progress…

If it all came to nothing here, then that would be terrible, wouldn't it?

So, I looked my sister straight in the eyes, and gave her a glare right back.

"Kirino!"

"… W-what… why are you angry?"

As I expected, Kirino faltered when she saw that I was serious. Not wanting to miss this opportunity, I shouted loudly.

"I-is that a cockroach?!"

"… Huh?"

It was honestly the oldest trick in the book, but somehow it worked. Everyone's attention (except for mine, of course) turned in the direction I was pointing. In

that short gap, I moved quickly. I shook off Kirino's grip from my collar, and quickly closed the distance between me and the box.

"Sorry!"

"Ahhnnn…"

I put my arms around the box behind the girl, and forcibly took it back.

Dammit, she also made a weird noise… it makes me seem like a hentai or something…

"Um, sorry for the intrusion…"

Fully conscious that my self-dignity had been torn to pieces, I made a hasty escape from the room.

Ugh… why is it that even though it's a holiday, I've had to do such terribly nerve-wracking things since noon …?

I seriously could cry right now… dammit.

Phew… well for now… I should

"Wait! Wait just a second!"

Nevermind! Kirino had come out into the hallway to chase me down!

Idiot, why do you hate losing so much?!

"I-I'll tell you what's going on later!"

"Shut up! You already made a mess of my holiday, so what the hell are you saying?!"

I should be the one saying that! It's incredible how much I wanted to say those exact same words to her.

Continuing my escape, I almost leaped down the stairs .

"Wait!"

Don't underestimate how fast a track star can run. In no time at all, she closed the distance between us, not giving me any other paths to run.

"…ugh."

Having been cornered in a dead end in the hallway, I slowly backed up while carrying the exceedingly dangerous box.

Kirino seized the box I held in my hand, and pulled with all her strength.

"Give it back!"

"N-no! I already told you I can't!"

To an objective spectator, our tussle over this cardboard box may look like just some children's argument.

They would say that we had let the blood rush to our heads and weren't thinking properly.

"Ooooooooooo…"

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrrr…"

Both of us were gritting our teeth. It was my strength pitted against hers. If it was just a matter of physical strength alone, then I would have the upper hand, but while we were having this tug of war Kirino continued to

kick me, and in that way leveled the playing field. Ouch! That hurts you know!

"Stop it!"

"Shut up! Die! Die die die die die!"

She was primarily aiming for my lower body, so I had no choice but to protect my sensitive areas.

Th-this is bad…! At this rate, I'm going to lose…!!

The minute I yielded just a bit to my angry sister's brute strength…

"Hyaaaah!"

Slip. Kirino lost her balance and fell to the floor.

It's not like this was unexpected. After all, the floors were pretty polished, and she was wearing socks and continually kicking me, so this was pretty unavoidable.

"H-hey– argh!"

And, of course, having been holding onto the box as well, I went right down with her.

In slow motion, I watched as the cardboard box danced in midair and Kirino toppled over onto her back.

"Watch out!"

As I was falling forwards, in an instant I reached out and took the back of Kirino's head in my hands.

I'm describing this in detail, but to the end this was an unconscious reflex. It's not like I was trying to protect her from the fall or anything.

Thud! We fell right on top of each other. I felt a sharp pain run through the hand between the back of Kirino's head and the floor.

When I opened my eyes after the fall, I saw my sister's face right in front of me. I have no idea what happened… but she looked completely dumbfounded. I probably had a similar expression on my face.

I was in pain, but it seemed that neither Kirino nor I were really hurt.

… Oogh…

"……."

"……."

Glued to each other on the floor, we stared at each other for a few seconds.

It took us both a few seconds to understand what had just happened.

It looked almost like I was trying to pull my sister closer with my right hand securely behind Kirino's head.

Meanwhile, my left hand (and this was definitely not on purpose) looked like it was just about to try to tear off the bra that was peeking out from her upturned clothing.

And, our lower bodies were tangled up, as if they were completely glued to each other.

"…….."

Being in this predicament, I couldn't help but think a certain thought.

… If this were an eroge, then an event CG would definitely start here…

I-I couldn't help it! After all, almost the same exact situation happened in the game I've been playing lately! I 'm not sure who exactly I was trying to explain myself to, but these thoughts ran through my head.

When she finally had taken stock of the situation, Kirino's face hardened.

Next, her well-proportioned face flushed a brilliant red . Her small lips began to tremble.

"Wha…?!?! W-w-w-wha…?!?!"

"C-c-c-calm d-down…! This was a bad accident! It wasn't any of our faults…!"

"Y-y-you hentai! Siscon! [23] Rapist!"

"It wasn't on purpose!!! And also, who the hell are you calling siscon?!"

"Shut up! J-just get off!"

With that, we began to squawk and gripe at each other .

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!!"

A shrill shriek came from behind me. Kirino's face immediately paled, and she tensed up.

Somehow or other, there was probably something behind me that I should be scared of.

Dreading what I might find, I slowly turned around.

"Gah…"

Kirino's friends had assembled in the hallway.

"K-Kirino…?"

"Uwaah… should we leave you two alone?"

"Could this be… forbidden love?! You two are like that?!"

These girls… what an unimaginably huge misinterpretation.

How the hell did they come up with that conclusion?! These damn brats…

"Definitely not!!"

Kirino and I shouted the same words at the same time.

To an extent, you could say that it was a rare moment when Kirino and I were on the same wavelength.

A few hours later –

"Ugh……."

I was sitting on the porch, hanging my head in sadness .

What happened after that was… well…

Even though such a huge fuss had been raised, in the end I managed to protect the box.

And, while my sister was separated from her friends, I managed to explain to her certain pieces of important information, and also was able to explain to her friends that it had all been an accident (although, whether they believe me or not was a separate issue).

But, even after she knew the whole story, my sister's anger did not subside, and she punished me unreasonably.

"Out out out out! Until everyone goes home, don't you dare come into the house! You hentai!"

It seems that, more than the misunderstanding and so forth, the fact that I had touched her chest made her really angry.

It's not like I wanted to touch it or something…

Man, girls are devious, aren't they…? Don't you agree ?

"Ouch. It still stings… dammit."

And so… for that reason, I've been sitting out here on the porch in the dusk for over an hour.

The living room was right behind me, but the window was locked.

"Ughhhhhhh…"

A wave of depression washed over me. I yawned heavily.

"Thanks for having us over~~"

I heard a voice from near the entranceway. Leaning forwards and looking in that direction, I saw the junior high girls gathered near the front door. It seemed that it was time for them to go home.

… Phew… I can finally enter the house again now…

I was really acting like a puppy with its tail between its legs. I mean, why the hell was the eldest son of the Kousaka household held in such low regards?

I've always thought that I should do something about that, but it was hard to change the flow of a current once that current had already been decided upon.

… Even then, today was pretty terrible.

Kirino's classmates already had the worst impression of me. I had told them it was all a misunderstanding, but once you're labeled as that "brute brother who attacked his sister," you'll have a pretty hard time getting rid of that label.

But whatever. Sure, it's true that they're all pretty cute, but I don't care if a bunch of idiot brats hate me… No really, I mean that.

Ugh. I sniffled a bit (it had nothing to do with my emotions, trust me!), and wiped my sweaty face with my shirt.

Even though it was evening, it was steaming hot outside.

"… Ugh… somehow or other…"

As all the bad things that happened today accumulated in my mind, I found myself falling into a rare gloomy mood.

Well, let's return home then…

I stood up from the porch, and still clutching the cardboard box, turned towards the front door that the girls had just left from.

And then…

Suddenly, a lone girl came jogging back. She stopped near me, maintaining a decent amount of distance between us.

"Umm…"

"… Yes?"

Hm… this was one of Kirino's friends, wasn't it…?

W-what does she want…? Did she come back to say something to me?

"… Umm… did you need something?"

I steeled myself for any ridicule that may come my way, but that wasn't what she had come to do.

"I… wanted to talk to you about that box…"

"… Ah… so you want to know what was in the package? I'm sorry, but…"

I can't tell you… that's what I tried to say, but she interrupted me with a "no, that's not it."

"I'm not here to interrogate you or anything. Well… of course it's about whatever was inside that box, since it's been bothering me, but… ah, this is becoming a bit too much like an interrogation, isn't it?"

She seemed at a bit of a loss of words, but before long she collected herself and spoke up again.

"Would it have been bad if Kirino herself had opened the box?"

"Huh?"

How did she know? At my puzzled expression, she continued.

"I mean, back there, I don't think you [24] were just trying to harass her or something. You were really desperate… trying really hard. So, I feel there had to be a reason for it…"

I see… this girl is pretty soft-hearted. Smiling a bit, I answered her.

"Haha… so you mean, there may have been a reason why it would have been bad if I had let Kirino open the box?"

"Yes! I mean, your name was the one on the shipping slip! I was thinking that maybe it was a present for Kirino that you had wanted to give her someday in the future… is that it? So, even though Kirino really didn't like it, you went through all that trouble?

"No, it wasn't like that."

I answered honestly. I'm really not that nice of a brother.

Even though her guess was a bit off the mark… I was a bit comforted by her words.

"Oh… is that so?"

She said that, a bit puzzled. However, having her initial guess refuted, she took it in stride and pulled herself together.

"Then, there must have been something else going on, I'm sure of it! What that situation is, I can't say I know. But, please forgive Kirino! This might not be something that's appropriate for me to say to you, but that girl can be a bit selfish sometimes."

No, I don't think "a bit" cuts it. It's not "a bit" at all!

She raised her head, and clenching both her hands in what looked like a victory pose, made this claim.

"But, I don't think she really hates you!"

"Y-you think so?"

"Definitely, without a doubt! My intuition says so!"

She may be able to come to that conclusion easily, but I really don't agree. That girl hates her brother with a passion. No matter how I look at it, she's reading the situation wrong. But she really is kind-hearted…

In addition to this though, she may have gotten a terribly wrong impression of my relationship with Kirino .

Kirino doesn't like me, and I wouldn't do anything for Kirino.

Of course, a lot of things have happened, but it's not as peachy as this girl seems to think.

No matter how I looked at it, this cheerful kindhearted girl's guess was completely wrong. But…

"I see. Thanks for your advice. I'll take it to heart."

I offered her my honest thanks. She went out of her way to think about my relationship with Kirino and said so many kind things… so more than anything I wanted to at least thank her.

I had thought that the people who came over today were all stupid brats, but…

Hey, what do you know, she's met some good people at school too, hasn't she?

"Ahaha. No no, I also apologize for being so forward."

Seemingly embarrassed, she moved her hands around bashfully. I gave her a smile.

"Please… take care of Kirino from here on out as well."

"Of course! We're close friends after all! Ah." The girl clapped her hands together.

"I just remembered! I had something I wanted to ask of you…" With that, she presented me with her cell phone.

"We were able to make each other's acquaintance, so… would you want to swap numbers?"

"What kind of numbers?"

In retrospect, that was a really stupid response.

"Come on, I mean our email addresses of course! And our phone numbers!"

"You want mine? … Why?"

"Do you… not want to?"

"No, I don't mind, I guess…"

Somehow or other, it seems that I've been easily getting quite a few junior high school girls' phone numbers lately…

A bit embarrassed, I handed over my own cell phone.

Ping. With the IR communication system, our phone numbers and mail addresses were swapped in an instant.

"Ahah, it's done. Thank you very much."

Looking at her cell phone, she seemed happy.

Wh-what… why does she look so happy…? I feel a bit embarrassed.

Taking back my own cell phone, I realized that I still didn't know her name.

"I'm Kousaka Kyousuke. And you are?"

"Ah, sorry! I forgot to introduce myself…"

Lightly tapping herself on the forehead, she seemed a bit embarrassed.

"I'm Aragaki Ayase."

Chapter 1: Part 7

My sister's friends. My meeting with Ayase still left a sweet echo in our family's garden.

Or rather, maybe that was just the perfume she was wearing…

In any case, at that time, seeming as if I had just taken sleeping pills, I stood up in a daze. Well, how do I put it … people who also have a little sister around Kirino's age should understand me, but my little sister's friends seemed… really cute. Even though they should have just been brats around my sister's age.

… Well, if we limit ourselves to the girl who I just talked to, she was a serious beauty. So it was all the more … ugh.

While I hit myself repeatedly in the forehead, the locked window behind me, the one that led to the living room, opened.

In that window, Kirino suddenly appeared.

"……."

Her face was completely expressionless. Her cold stare pierced completely through me.

My sister beckoned me with her index finger.

"Hmm…. Ah, right. You're still in a foul mood, aren't you…"

The strange, sweet atmosphere was shattered in an instant. I shrugged my shoulders.

Well then. The pretty girl from the faraway land has returned home already.

Now, after a few Kirino-free hours, it's time to deal with the pretty girl at home.

Character file.06
Ayase Aragaki

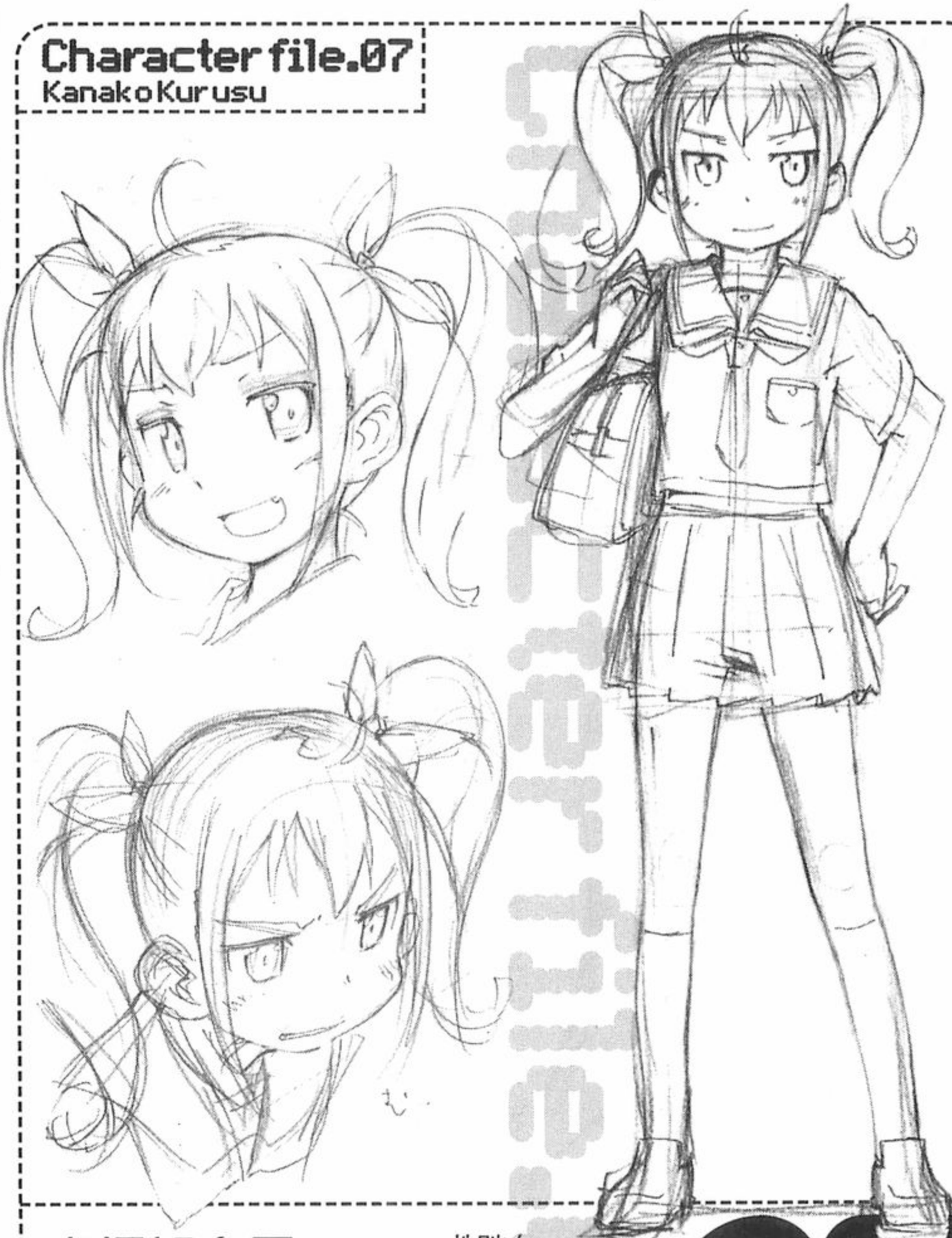
新垣あやせ【あらがき・あやせ】

◆桐乃のクラスメイト。モデル仲間ということもあり、特に仲がいい。思い込みが強く自己完結しがちな面も。

◆性別:女
◆年齢:14歳
◆身長:166cm
◆体重:44Kg
◆3サイズ:80/56/83

06

Character file.07
Kanako Kurusu



来栖加奈子【くるす・かなこ】

◆桐乃のクラスメイト。ツインテール、小柄な体格、驕慢でイタズラ好きという典型的な「生意気女子中学生」。

◆性別:女
◆年齢:14歳
◆身長:148cm
◆体重:39Kg
◆3サイズ:70/51/77

07

Chapter 2

第二章

ore no imouto ga konnani kawaii wake ga nai❷

This may be strange coming from myself, but I'm an extremely ordinary high school student.

I don't belong to any clubs, and I don't have any hobbies worth mentioning. In my free time, I watch TV and read manga, and also hang around town with my friends.

Well, lately, I've also been doing something else in my free time, but I don't really want to talk about that.

You might think I'm being safe and boring, but for me, normality is a relatively important thing. Being ordinary, without standing out, without attracting attention, living out each day in a laid-back, peaceful way… that's my stance on life.

"…. Yawnnnn…"

I was in a classroom during my break period. Following my creed, I gave off a long carefree yawn.

"Ahaha, you seem sleepy today as well. Kyou-chan?"

"I guess. I haven't been getting enough sleep lately… oh, thanks."

I felt a refreshing breeze blowing gently on my sweaty face. Sitting at the seat next to me, my bespectacled childhood friend was using a desk pad [25] to fan me. Desk pads were very valuable cooling devices for students in the summertime, and I don't think anybody can disagree with that. Around the classroom, I could see many classmates fanning themselves as well with desk pads.

"Feel nice? The test is coming up soon, so don't strain yourself too much, alright? If you stress yourself out and get sick, then there's no point, right?"

At her caring words, I gave her a smile. "Ahh, yeah… I 'll be careful."

"I'm fine now, you can fan yourself."

"It's alright. I'm not that hot."

Liar. Isn't that a good deal of sweat on your brow?

Sigh… I felt a strange pain in my chest. It's probably because I'm carrying a pretty shameful secret.

The real reason why I seem so sleepy is that every night, I've been playing eroge deep into the nighttime. It's not like I can say that to anyone.

Especially to this girl, who's putting all her effort into fanning me with the desk pad.

This girl seriously thinks that I've been staying up late at night because I've been trying hard to study.

"Oh, right, Kyou-chan. Today, do you want to come over to my house? We just made some cold kuzukiri. [26] You need to take a break once in a while, right?"

This plain-looking bespectacled girl was Tamura Manami. She was a childhood friend of mine, and her family ran a Japanese confectionary.

Her grades were on the bottom end of good. She didn't participate in any clubs, but her hobbies were cooking and sewing. She was well-mannered and had many friends, but almost none of them were intimate friends who would hang out with her after school.

She was the quintessential supporting actor. There was nobody else in the world that fit the bill of "normal," "

ordinary," or "plain" as much as she did. She was the polar opposite to Kirino.

"I guess that would be fun."

"Eheheh~… great."

As usual, Manami sent me back a warm happy smile.

She was a bit of a natural airhead, but that's one thing I liked about her. When I was beside her I found an amazing sense of calm.

"Alright, Kyou-chan. It's a promise!"

Saying that, Manami went away from my seat, and went to talk with her other friends.

A male student by the name of Akagi came over and took her place.

"Hey, Kousaka."

"What's up? You look so gloomy."

"This has been bothering me for a long time, but are you going out with Tamura-san?"

Taken by surprise, I widened my eyes a bit.

"No… did it seem that way?"

"Yeah, it did. You can ask anybody in this class and they'll tell you the same thing."

Huh… that's quite surprising.

Manami was talking with her girlfriends in another part of the classroom. I gave Manami a quick glance, and turned back to Akagi.

Indifferent, I opened my mouth.

"… It's not like that. We're just good friends. After all, we've known each other since we were small."

"Oh. So… you don't have romantic feelings for her or something like that?"

"……"

Raising my eyebrows, I tried to hurry him along.

"None."

"……. Oh."

I responded reluctantly. I don't think I have any feelings like that for Manami. If I had to say it, I would say she's more like a little sister… nah, that way of explaining things is wrong too. Hm, how should I put it …

"Hey, Akagi, take this for example. Imagine that ever since you were young, you've lived with a real nice grandmother. And suppose that you're naturally very attached to that grandmother."

"… This doesn't seem to have anything to do with anything."

Akagi narrowed his eyes, and I stuck out one of my hands at him.

"Just let me finish… and then, one day, by some magic your grandmother got 50 years younger and she's now the same age as you. Try to imagine what you would feel about that girl."

"… How did this suddenly turn into a fantasy…?"

Akagi just became more bewildered, and I nonchalantly continued.

“It’s sort of like that.”

“What am I supposed to understand from that?!”

“Well, then whatever. It’s not like it bothers me if you don’t understand.”

Increasingly losing interest in this topic, I tried to stop the conversation then and there, but Akagi wasn’t satisfied.

For some reason, the conversation felt like it had suddenly turned serious.

“Well then, if you two are not going out, then is it safe to assume that you also have no plans to go out with her in the future?”

“Huh? What exactly are you asking?”

I responded to his question with a question of my own . I was getting a bit testy.

"For example… if some other guy were to ask out Tamura-san, you wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Huh? Of course I would mind. I wouldn't allow it. Who is it, then? They better watch out for me."

At my immediate, irritated response, Akagi seemed shocked.

"… But, you said a few seconds ago that you don't like her in that way."

"So?"

"So… why? Kousaka… why would you say something like this? If you really are just childhood friends with Tamura-san, then it's not like you two are going out. And it's not like you're in love with her. But you don't want any other guys going out with her?"

"… Something wrong with that?"

Dammit, why did I have to respond that way? It makes me look like I'm some cliché thick-headed character who hasn't realized his secret feelings for his childhood friend or something. Even though that's not true at all.

Although, I was being completely honest in my responses.

I didn't think there would be anyone that interested in such an unrefined girl as Manami… but if by some chance such a person appears, I would throw my entire body and soul into blocking his advances.

When I'm by her side, I feel more calm than I have ever felt. Even though there aren't any romantic feelings involved.

If someone tried to intrude on that feeling, I would never forgive them.

"You're saying some really selfish things, Kousaka… don't you feel sorry for poor Tamura-san?"

"You know, you have no right to be saying that. If the person herself said it, I would consider it."

I said that with the intention of getting him to cut it out, and with that Akagi fell silent.

"… Hmm."

Acting quite naturally, I looked around for my childhood friend.

And then, suddenly, our eyes met. Manami sent me a worried look, as if she was asking "What's wrong?"

I snorted, trying to tell her "It's nothing."

When all is said and done, that was what my relationship with Manami was like.

It was after school. With Manami beside me, I was headed towards the Tamura house. Her house was done in the old style, and was a bluish two-story building. Honestly, it wouldn't feel too out of place if it were placed in the middle of Edo Wonderland. [27]

At a glance, it was a sturdy, relatively large house.

A part of the first floor was a Japanese confectionary, so we could always eat and drink in there. By the way, they didn't only get old people as customers; surprisingly, their main customer base came from young girls.

Even though it's such an old-fashioned shop… I don't understand it.

Well, certainly, depending how you looked at it, you could say that it was a well-known shop that boasted a long tradition of making confections.

"I'm home."

"… I'm home." [28]

We entered the house through the back entrance. The minute we entered into the entranceway, I could smell the scent of incense drifting about in the air. It was a smell you would expect in an old man's house out in the countryside. Manami let me pass into the Japanese-style living room, and then…

"Wait just a second."

With that, she went up the stairs. I raised one hand to send her off.

"Phew… let's settle in then…"

Stretching my legs out on the tatami mats, I felt quite at home. In fact, without Kirino here, you could say I felt even more relaxed.

As I was thinking this, I heard a voice. “Oh, is that you , Kyou-chan?”

“Ojiichan, hello. [29] Sorry for intruding.”

“You’re not intruding. Feel free to make yourself at home. Hey, baa-san [30]. Kyou-chan came over. Bring the watermelon.”

He looked happy as he called down the hallway. I then heard the pitter patter of footsteps as Manami’s grandmother came into view. This person was always smiling. I’ve never seen her with a different expression.

“Well, Kyou-chan. Did you come to take Manami as your wife?”

This was Manami’s grandmother’s idea of a classy joke , and probably her favorite thing to say.

I responded as usual, with a wry smile and with a "No no, that's not it." With that, Manami's grandfather pouted.

"Baa-san, cut the watermelon. The watermelon. That big one I just bought a little while ago."

"It's still a bit early to be eating that watermelon, ojiisan."

The Tamura household consisted of Manami, her brother, her two parents, and her two grandparents.

This large family contrasted strongly with the Kyousuke household, which was more of a typical nuclear family.

Just as you would expect looking at Manami, her entire family consisted of gentle individuals, and were also all airheaded, albeit to different degrees of severity … as I was thinking this, one other person arrived.

"I'm home! Ohhh, who's here?!"

With heavy footsteps, Tamura Iwao came into view. He was Manami's younger brother.

He was currently fourteen years old. He went to a local junior high school (different from the one Kirino went to, though). Like his sister, he didn't stand out too much, and the last time I saw him he had an exceedingly plain appearance, with black hair and black rimmed glasses.

But I had heard from Manami that lately, he dyed his hair, changed out his glasses for contacts, and got really into Western music or something…

"Ah! It's An-chan! What's up?!"

"Hey. Uhh… what's with your hair?"

"I cut it! Hehe… what do you think? Super cool, right?"

"……."

Standing in front of my childhood friend's brother's "super cool new hairstyle," I was at a loss for words for a moment.

Iwao patted his own head, and puffed out his chest with a proud expression.

"An-chan, did you know?! This hairstyle is the skinhead style that's really in fashion right now!"

"No no no no! That's just a close shave! It's not a skinhead style or anything!"

I couldn't help but interject. What the hell is this junior high student saying?!

Also, this "skinhead" thing wasn't really in fashion, was it?

Iwao put on an expression not unlike a millionaire who had just discovered that the hard-earned, prized painting in his collection was fake.

"Huh? Huh? … Haha… what are you saying, An-chan ? You don't know much about this stuff, do you… no matter how you look at it, this is a skinhead style, isn't it? "

"Where is there a skinhead with hair that shade of blue ?!"

Stroking his hair, Iwao let out a scream like he was the subject of Munch's "The Scream." [31]

"Really?!?! Dammit… that guy in the barbershop completely lied to me?!"

"Well, if it's the barber you usually go to, then he probably didn't want to give you a skinhead haircut even if you asked him to, or else your parents might complain afterwards."

"U… ughh… ooo…"

Iwao seemed heartbroken. Something he seemed so proud about turned out to be a flop…

There was also a more cynical explanation, that the barber was just agreeing to give him a skinhead haircut jokingly. It's probably better if Iwao didn't know about his haircut, but I had already let the cat out of the bag. Well, to some extent it's his fault for getting the haircut in the first place.

"Ugh, maybe I should cut it again myself…"

"Stop that. You wouldn't be able to do that well. They used a special razor to cut it in the first place, right?"

"Ugh… but nobody at school told me about this…"

Who knows why? But, why is it that this junior high student wanted so much to be different from everyone else?

At this time, the forms of Kirino's otaku friends that I had met last month appeared in my mind.

Right then, Manami came back, having changed out of her uniform. She brought tea with kuzukiri on a tray with her.

"W-what are you two doing?"

"Not much, he just had something shocking happen to him…"

I spoke while rubbing Iwao's closely shaven head. Manami faced her heartbroken little brother and smiled.

"I see. Well, I don't know what happened, but cheer up. Here, I also brought Rock's portion."

"What do you mean 'Rock'?"

I asked expressionlessly, and Manami smiled.

"Hm? Oh, umm… a while ago, Iwao came back from the barber's and told us 'Haha… with this cool haircut my name up to now is not adequate anymore! From today, call me Rock, neechan!' [32]"

"I see. Alright, I'll try that too. Nice to meet you, Rock. That's a really stylish haircut you have there."

"
Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!!
"

Rock ran out of the room while bawling. Having heard his own embarrassing idea come out of someone else's mouth must have really brought him to his senses. Poor guy.

And he's probably been spreading the same idea at school, so there's a distinct possibility that this might become a very long-running nickname for him… and if that happens, he won't be able to shake that name until graduating high school, and even then he'll still be tormented by it during class reunions.

Seeing her brother off, Minami blinked, confused.

"W-what's wrong with him…?"

"For men, there are things in the past which we want to forget."

"… Huh… I see… hm, that's pretty cool."

You were the one who finished him off though. I stopped myself from saying this to Manami.

In any case… Manami's parents were still at work, so they haven't been introduced yet, but the Tamura family was pretty much like this.

I see… you could say that it's precisely this kind of family that would raise a daughter like Minami.

"Oh. This is really good, this kuzukiri. Although I usually eat it with ponzu…" [33]

"It's nice with brown sugar syrup once in a while, isn't it? … We made a lot, so be sure to fill up."

"Ahh, I'll do that then. By the way, did your grandma make most of this?"

"Yeah. Ehehe… I also helped."

"Really… pretty impressive."

It was really a very normal conversation between me and Manami.

There was nothing exciting about it… which is exactly why I always loved the conversations I've had in this house.

"Kyou-chan, if you become my grandson, you'll be able to eat delicious sweets everyday, you know."

"Waah… Obaachan, stop it… you're annoying Kyou-chan…"

"Obaasan, good thinking! Kyou-chan, you really should! If you get together with Manami… umm… lots of good things will happen! If you do it now, I'll also follow you to the end!"

If I do it now… stop treating this like a limited time offer or something…

Seriously, jii-chan! Those extra few words you tacked on at the end were just too much!

"Geez, ojii-chan. Don't say unnecessary things."

"Hm? So, you don't need your old grandfather anymore? Such words being told to me by my grandchild… there's no more point to living…!"

Swish. As Manami's grandfather seemed to fall over dead, Manami's grandmother faced him with a smile.

"Ah, your ojiisan is playing dead again. Don't take it seriously, alright? He gets too caught up in the moment sometimes…"

"Hehe."

Manami began to play dead as well, but when I realized her grandfather was joking I wanted to smack him.

Absolutely ordinary, without standing out, without making lots of noise, living out my life quietly and in a laid-back way…

The life I wanted was probably something like this.

Also, of course, there were no annoying little sisters around.

It was the next day, after school. As always, I was studying with Manami at the local library.

This was a custom that we went through every time it approached exam time.

I have to confess that during junior high, my grades were pretty awful. But even then, I didn't want to go to cram school. So, I asked my childhood friend, who had pretty good grades, to help me.

The result, as you can see, was that I was able to safely get admitted into the same high school as my childhood friend.

And now…

"Ah, dammit, I don't understand this here. Manami, look at it for a second."

"Hm? Ahh, this one… well, you just use this formula here like this… see?"

In order to get admitted to the same college as my childhood friend, I found myself again sitting next to Manami, asking her to help me study.

You could say that I hadn't grown. That I hadn't changed for the better.

And, if that's the case, isn't that a big deal? But do I really have to be ashamed because I "live an ordinary life " and because "nothing changes"? Although, you could also say that this gives off the impression of "having no dreams" or "having low standards"… In the end, the meaning of "living normally" is not as simple as it seems.

On the other hand, you could also think of it as really great. At least, I thought that way.

And so, well, I'm fine with the way things are.

To not change for the better, to seek the same future as the present… those are the things I've always desired.

The person I wanted to be when I was in middle school I've already become today, so I have no complaints at all.

Although, it's not like everything was perfect.

For example, there was my sister, or my sister, and my sister.

Well, such was life. There are always things that are out of our control.

"I see… so you do it like this. I got it. Thanks, Manami. What about this one?"

"Hm? Which one?"

"Here, this one… this one where you have to prove this ugly looking formula…"

Math was my weak point, so for a while I've been getting Manami to help me out with math.

You're probably supposed to differentiate here or something, but…

I leaned forwards to allow Manami easier access to my notes.

When I did that, Manami started saying something like "wah, wah…"

"Uh, something wrong?"

"N-nothing… um, this one? Uhh, uhh…"

"Why are you so worked up…? Hey, your glasses fogged over, you know."

If that were true, she wouldn't be able to see anything.

"H-huh?"

Like she had been attacked with a Medapani [34] spell, Manami looked around restlessly. It was certainly an interesting little act…

"Hey."

Snatching the fogged over glasses from her, I watched as Manami squirmed shyly.

"Ahh, no… if you take my glasses I won't be able to see," Manami said with upturned eyes.

"I know. Haha, your eyesight is really bad isn't it?" [35]

"Oohh… Kyou-chan, stop being mean. G-give me back my glasses."

There are characters in manga and the like that are true beauties when they take off their glasses, but my childhood friend's glasses-free face, as you can see, is quite plain. However…

Whenever I stole Manami's glasses, she would always get flustered just like this.

"They say that putting on glasses makes you more plain looking, but you stay the same."

"O-oo…"

I guess I have to confess that honestly, I love seeing my childhood friend flustered like this.

Yes, it might be a bit mean, but I can't help myself from getting her like this over and over.

"B-but, Kyou-chan… they also say that putting on glasses makes you look wiser."

"Yeah, I suppose."

Either way, you don't look even a bit like an intellectual.

I didn't say that to her though. Wiping the glasses down, I tried them on myself.

Of course, they were too strong for me, and I watched as the world warped before me.

"Hm. How do I look… like a genius?"

"Mmm~~…….. ??"

"… What's with that harsh tone?"

I raised my eyebrows, and Manami, confused, tried to clear up the understanding with a "Huh? Ah, no, that wasn't what I meant…"

"You're not wearing your glasses, so you won't know until you come closer."

"Ahh."

While wearing her glasses, I brought my face closer to hers.

But because my sense of direction was warped by the glasses, I ended up lightly touching my nose to hers.

"….. ?!?!"

"Ah, oops."

I apologized to Manami who seemed to have lost her breath. Separating myself from her a little, I asked her again.

"Well? Do I look smarter?"

"Ugh… y-you idiot."

… I wasn't asking for a compliment or anything, but that just sounded cruel.

Did I really look that stupid…?

And like this, we continued to study, sometimes talking back and forth and making conversation.

For me, this type of studying was much more agreeable than going to cram school and jamming in knowledge.

That's why I made progress every time I studied with Manami.

"Alrighty, let's stop here for today."

While I stretched, Manami gave me a smile.

"Yeah. You worked hard today, Kyou-chan."

"Haha, I guess. At this rate, I'm going to ace the exams ."

"And like that, soon you'll start neglecting your work. If you don't continue doing this every day, it'll all go to waste, alright?"

"Yeah yeah, I got it."

Picking up my bag, I headed towards the library exit with my childhood friend.

Reaching the exit, we saw a sunset spread out before us.

I've seen this same scene a countless number of times, but I'm still not tired of it.

You could say that it was a scene that was filled with the satisfaction of a full day's work.

Like that, we headed home. Soon, we arrived at the usual road where we branched off from each other.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Kyou-chan."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

Separating like we always did, we began to walk on our own separate paths.

And so another normal day, another day in which nothing out of the ordinary or worth mentioning happened, came to a close.

Every day was warm and gentle, without change, but also a bit lacking in some ways.

For a long time, I've felt this way.

If I could just live a few more decades like this…

Then I think I'd be satisfied with my life.

It was another day. On my way home from school with Manami, we happened to meet an unexpected acquaintance at the junction by the side of my house.

"Ah, good afternoon!"

"Oh?"

Facing the person who had sent me that greeting, I raised a hand in recognition.

It was Kirino's friend I had met a few days ago, Aragaki Ayase. She was wearing her uniform, so I guessed that she was on her way back from school. Even though Kirino was also a pretty girl, when she wore a sailor uniform she gave off the impression of a cheeky kogal [36]. Ayase, in contrast, had the appearance of a trim and tidy schoolgirl.

It wasn't just because of her long, black hair or her slender physique, but also how she exuded an aura of peace and tranquility.

"… Kyou-chan. Someone you know?"

"Hm? Yeah. Umm…"

I started to introduce Ayase to a surprised Manami, but Ayase beat me to the punch.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Aragaki Ayase."

"Huh? … Ah, it's a pleasure."

Facing the cheerful pretty girl, Manami seemed nervous as she also introduced herself. "Um, I'm T-Tamura Manami. Nice to meet you." I couldn't say I didn't know how she felt. I had a hard time talking to pretty girls as well.

After the introductions were over, Ayase sent me a suggestive smile.

"Ahaha, thanks for the other day."

"Ah, ahh…"

Strangely finding myself at a loss for words, I gave a vague response.

The other day, when Ayase had come over, I at first looked at her through cruel eyes. But, getting to know her proved to be a happy occurrence, one of the only bright spots in that gloomy day.

We even exchanged mail addresses. You could say that my address book was getting filled with the names of junior high school girls.

From an objective perspective, I guess I was in an enviable position.

"Well, please excuse me then," she said, expressing her intention to leave.

"Ah, is your house around here? You're coming home from school, right?"

"No, you can actually see my house over there, in that direction."

"Ah, I see."

"Yup! Well then, I hope we'll see each other later… oh right, there's something I wanted to talk to you about. The truth is, I got some samples from the first magazine featuring both me and Kirino. Kirino should have them to, so please take a look at them later!"

Hm, so she also was a model…

"That's pretty amazing. I'll be sure to take a look."

"… Hehe, the truth is, it's a special summer edition of the magazine, so we're wearing swimsuits, so it's a bit embarrassing."

"H-huh… swimsuits?"

"Yeah. Ah, but but, I'm not as stylish as Kirino, so don't get your hopes up, alright?"

I'll look forward to it. Much more than my own sister in a swimsuit, at the very least.

"Oh, shoot, if I'm late Kirino's going to get angry. Well, see you later!"

With an angelic smile [37] and her parting words, Ayase left.

"Yeah. See you later."

I raised a hand to send her off. Manami stood blankly, staring at us strangely. Finally, placing a hand on her chest, she let out a sigh with a "Haah…"

"… S-she was really mature… like an actress or something."

"Mm. She's certainly a beauty."

There was no other way to put it. Incidentally, Manami's evaluation of Kirino boiled down to "super

cool and cute." Both of her assessments were pretty intuitive, but I think the different nuances to these descriptions expressed well the differences between Ayase and Kirino.

"Ahaha, Kyou-chan, you sure were staring closely at that girl's face."

"Eh? R-really? Seriously?"

I was startled. It was a rule of mine to never do that when I was with female friends, but… if Manami said I was doing that, then I believe her. After all, she looks after me more than anyone else, so for better or worse, she wouldn't lie to me.

And if that was true, then Ayase would have probably naturally also noticed my gaze…

Ugh, not good… What am I doing?

Feeling uncomfortable, I couldn't bring myself to look at Manami.

While gazing at me, Manami put one hand on her cheek, and spoke as if she was looking at something charming.

"Hm. Kyou-chan's a boy, after all… I'm a bit relieved."

"Hey, why are you treating me like I'm your grandson or something?"

No matter how you looked at it, that was something you said to your grandson who was able to get the girl he wanted.

For a high school girl to speak like this went way above awkward, and I was worried for her.

Will she really be alright, when she's already talking like an old woman now…?

"Ah, I'll bet you're thinking something rude. I know already, I know what you want to say. Punpun. [38]"

Just take a look, ladies and gentlemen. Here is a high school girl who actually uses mimetic words. [39]

"Ah, you're thinking something mean again. Geez, Kyou-chaaan… if you don't cut it out, I'm going to tell your mom that you were looking at a junior high student with pervy eyes."

"Don't do that!"

That's not funny! If my mother caught a whiff of something like that, she'd definitely bring it up at dinner. And then, Kirino would find out too, right? I didn't think there was any way she could hate me more, but there was also that time before when I accidentally pushed her down, so this would be really bad to bring up.

And also, what does she mean pervy eyes?! I never put such an obscene thing into how I was looking at her! Absolutely not!

But I didn't say any of this. Because if I started making excuses here, soon I would be lying through my teeth.

Instead, I tried to dodge the issue by answering jokingly.

"… Hm, well if I had to stare at someone, I would rather stare at a cute girl."

"I guess that's true… hmm… I should try my best too …"

Crap, I forgot.

Whenever I said something like that to this girl, she would get really sad and start seriously meditating on her own shortcomings.

Dammit, now I feel guilty.

But I had a perfect countermeasure to this. Timidly, I whispered.

"No, I mean… Manami? I think you're fine just the way you are."

"… Really?"

"Yeah. Instead of trying to do strange things beyond your ability, just try to be yourself."

"… R-really? You… think so?"

While looking downwards, Manami stole a glance every once in a while at my face.

Giving my consent, I gave my opinion clearly.

"Yeah, I think that's for the better. It's best if you don't change."

"… Is it really alright… if I don't change…? You… like me that way?"

Although this would definitely not happen, if Manami became like Kirino, I would be outrageously bothered by it. It might be too late, but withdrawing my previous remarks, I tried to comfort her somewhat desperately.

"Yeah, I do. I really like you this way, even more than that other girl just now."

It wasn't the most eloquent of praises, and for some reason I couldn't come up with anything less stale, but I'll praise her with these words anyways. It doesn't really matter, so I'll praise her to high heaven. And then…

"E-ehehe… that makes me happy…"

Manami had looked like she was about to cry, but her expression widened into a smile, and I stroked my chest in relief. It seemed like my smiling childhood friend's behavior would never change.

But…

It was morning in the classroom.

It was the break right after first period. Drawing near to Manami's seat, I called out to her, not having spoken to her yet that day. It was a bit strange, but this morning Manami was late, and didn't show up to our usual meeting spot.

"Hey. What happened this morning? Did you oversleep?"

"… Eh? Y-yeah… I did. Sorry, I kept you waiting…"

"You don't have to apologize. You never make me apologize when I'm late."

"Y-yeah…"

Manami nodded, but maybe she was still apologetic or something, since she kept her head cast downwards.

I felt slightly uncomfortable seeing her in this strange mood, but pushed it to the back of my mind.

Thinking back, I guess that Manami was acting like that all through class too, but I had missed breakfast that morning, so I was too busy thinking about how hungry I was to really pay her any mind.

It was after school on the same day. In an unusual turn of events, today it was me who called out to Manami.

It was almost a perfect recreation of the scene that morning.

"Manami, let's go home together."

"Umm… uhh…"

Manami put a hand to her forehead as if she had a headache, and looked at me through upturned eyes.

"Sorry… I have something I need to do. I can't go home with you today…"

"Ah, I-I see…"

I was surprised at how disappointed I felt at this point. I just didn't want to admit that to Manami, so I continued in the most cheerful voice I could muster.

"Ah, fine fine. Don't worry about it. We can take a day off of studying together. I don't want to keep imposing on you anyways. Sometimes it's nice to study by yourself ."

"I'm really sorry…"

"I said it's fine. I just wouldn't feel right about forcing you to study with me every single day anyways."

This is probably the first time this kind of conversation has ever happened. Usually, I would just say whatever I wanted to her… How unusual.

As I predicted, when I went home, I couldn't get any studying done.

It would be best if tomorrow things could go back to normal, and I could get helped by Manami again.

I was perfectly carefree as these thoughts passed through my head.

But…

"Sorry, Kyou-chan… I can't today either."

After school on the next day, Manami once again told me that she couldn't study with me.

W-what?!

Feeling shaken by her announcement, I replied with my voice in disarray. “W-why?”

She wasn’t waiting for me at our usual meeting spot this morning either… what exactly was going on?

“… It’s just that… I have plans…”

Manami was terrible at lying. But this time, it was difficult for me to gauge whether she was lying or not.

One reason for this was that Manami was hanging her head sadly, so I couldn’t really see her face.

Another reason was that I could honestly feel how bad she felt for doing this.

So, even if she was lying about having plans, I couldn’t really hold it against her.

“… Alright. I guess there’s no helping it if you have plans.”

Leaving without raising a fuss, I headed towards the exit of the classroom…

“Haaah…”

I sighed. After all, I felt that Manami had definitely been acting a bit strangely… but also, to be frank, my traditional study session with Manami was not just to help me get better grades, but also served to be a precious time when I could rejuvenate my tired spirit.

Especially ever since I was forced to give my sister those life advice sessions, spending my free time with Manami in that carefree way has become all the more important.

As soon as that was taken away from me, even though it's only been two days, I could already feel my spirit becoming heavy.

… Yeah. I guess I am pretty dependent on her after all …

These thoughts were all going through my head at that time. Then, Akagi appeared and spoke to me in a teasing tone of voice.

"What's wrong, Kousaka, is she avoiding you?"

"Huh? What are you…"

It wasn't like he was saying something outrageous, so I couldn't do anything but fire back a stupid response.

So, what happened? Did he see my little exchange with Manami back there?

… There are lots of characters like this in dramas too, I guess.

I guess this makes him the meddlesome minor side character, whose first name doesn't even get revealed during the story.

"I mean, Kousaka, you've realized it yourself right? Lately, Tamura-san has been plainly avoiding you."

"… Manami's been avoiding me?"

I hadn't even considered that possibility. I guess my understanding of the situation was pretty dim.

"Why do you think that?"

"Come on, no matter how you look at it, that's what's happening, isn't it? Just now even, you two looked like a bickering couple or something."

"……."

Normally, I would immediately ignore such a crazy remark… but honestly, it is true that Manami's been acting strange lately…

Frowning, I fell into silence.

… Manami… was avoiding me?

That should be impossible, but thinking back on the recent conversations we've had, it definitely fit the situation.

Certainly, these two past days, she's been trying to avoid eye contact with me.

Also, even when we talked, her voice sounded weak, like it had no energy.

It seemed like she was trying to act normally though, so I didn't bring any of this up with her.

But now she's refusing to study with me, to walk home with me, because she "has plans."

At the very least, to a casual observer, it certainly might look like she's trying to avoid me.

Well, what if it was true? Let's suppose that she really was avoiding me.

I can't imagine why she would. Did I do something to her? I don't think I've done anything wrong…

Also, generally, it was pretty easy to tell when Manami got angry, with the way she would pout and blurt it out.

She was definitely not the kind of person to avoid someone without even telling them why.

I seriously have no idea. I really don't know what to do here.

"… Does it seriously look that way?"

I had left the classroom with Akagi, and I asked him that.

If she really was avoiding me, I would want to know why and why she was doing this without even telling me . Akagi's response ran like this:

"… yeah. Kousaka, you know, I might know what's going on."

"What?"

"Tamura-san probably got a boyfriend, didn't she?"

"Huh?"

My face probably held the same kind of grimace I gave when I was forced to give my sister life advice.

"Umm… why do you think that?"

"I mean, just think about it, Kousaka. If you got a girlfriend, wouldn't you also try to distance yourself a bit from Tamura-san? But it's hard to just tell her 'Oh, I got a girlfriend, so from today we can't go home together and we can't study together.' And lately, Tamura-san has been telling you that she has plans so she can't go with you. The facts fit, don't they?"

That doesn't make it true. I immediately rejected Akagi's outrageous claim.

I couldn't imagine Manami being able to get a boyfriend, just like I couldn't imagine that Kirino had gotten one…

"Well, I have club activities, so I'll see you later, Kousaka. Don't get too depressed over it. Hahaha."

After completely ruining my mood, Akagi patted me on the shoulder as if trying to cheer me up, and darted off briskly.

That asshole. As I glared fiercely at his retreating back, I continued to think.

About how it was utterly unthinkable that Manami could have gotten a boyfriend.

Although… well… even if she didn't have one now, I could see her having one in the distant future. Even though I don't really want to think about it.

Tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, we would probably continue to spend our days the same way we've spent them up until now.

But I might be being a bit optimistic to think that this would still be true five years, or ten years later.

This comfortable life may be exchanged for a completely different type of life in the future.

Adhering to my personal motto, I wanted to try to keep this lifestyle going for as long as possible..

It was impossible to completely stop people from changing. For me, and for Manami, and of course even for Kirino, every year we grew a year older, and soon we would graduate, and would even have to go job searching. There are plenty of things that would change, whether I like it or not.

"Hm…"

I tried to imagine it. For example, if in the future… if I got a girlfriend… would I try to avoid Manami?

Definitely not! Well, at least that's what I thought now.

It was nighttime on the same day. I was sitting on my own bed, reading manga.

While I was reading, I was thinking about boring things.

… Was Manami… really avoiding me…?

Earlier, I had thought that she might have been, but gradually, as time passed, I changed my mind and decided that she couldn't be.

I don't think Manami could change how she acted around me that easily.

I would do my best in my own way to keep that from happening, so that we could live on normally like we've been living.

It's just, today, I felt a strange prickling pain in my mind. As I thought, I was in no mood to study, but even when I read manga or watched television, I just couldn't get into it.

Because that idiot Akagi had said those stupid things, I was getting a bit worried by some trivial things in Manami's behavior that I wouldn't have noticed otherwise.

"I'm bored."

Tossing the manga I was reading away, I collapsed onto my bed.

Taking out my cell phone, I hit the number one on my speed dial.

I mean, it's probably better if I just ask the person herself. That's what I thought. In any case, it was probably some boring misunderstanding, so I should call Manami right away, get this cleared up, and then this will just become a funny story I can recall later.

But…

"The cell phone you have dialed is not in an area with cell phone service, or is turned off-"

The phone call didn't connect.

"… What the hell. Haaah…"

Sighing deeply, I squinted at my cell phone display.

I guess there's no helping it. I'll ask her at school tomorrow.

For some reason, I found this all very hard to swallow, and could feel myself getting irritated…

So I had to be patient till tomorrow… a bitter smile appeared on my face.

But the next morning, I was unable to talk to Manami.

That day, Manami didn't even come to school.

"Tamura-san is dealing with a situation at home, so she's taking a few days off."

That's what my homeroom teacher said.

A situation at home… what could that be…? I haven't heard anything about something like that…

I tried to ask my homeroom teacher for more details, but he couldn't supply any. We might be childhood friends, but he couldn't just carelessly give out the personal details of his students.

I begrudgingly saw his point, so I had no choice but to retreat.

I tried to ask the other girls in the class, but I got responses like “I don’t know” or “But, now that I think about it, she’s been a bit out of it lately… maybe that has something to do with it?” But nobody could tell me anything about this “situation at home” that I wanted to know about.

Hmph. Well, that’s that. If I really wanted to know, I should probably ask Manami herself.

But Manami was still unreachable by cell phone. My phone would still go to the same old “The number you have dialed-“ message, read by a robotic-like voice. As I listened to the message, I thought,

“Well… what should I do…?”

I started to think of another plan of attack.

It was after school.

Having returned to my own room, I took out my cell phone from my bag, and called a certain someone.

Even if I couldn’t connect to her cell phone, there were a few other ways I could try to get in touch with her.

The phone in the Manami household was used both as the phone for their home and for their business. So, whenever I had to get in touch with someone, I would try as much as possible not to call their home phone and call cell phones instead, since I didn't want to interfere in their work.

When the call connected, the person on the other line greeted me very loudly.

"HEY WELCOME! This is the Tamura shop!"

"… Why the hell are you answering your cell phone with business talk?"

Also what was with the sing-song way he was speaking?

"Huh?! It's how I always do it! That kind of question… could this be An-chan?!"

As always, he was such a flashy guy. And his voice was so loud.

Slightly bewildered, I responded with a "Yeah, this is."

"Seriously?! This is seriously An-chan?! You're not trying to trick me right?! If you're really the real An-chan , over there on the other end, you should be able to beat me into submission with a witty remark!"

"… You're really an idiot. Just look at your Caller ID, dammit. My number should be listed."

"Ooooh it's really you?! HEY! [40] As expected from An-chan!"

I moved the phone away from my ear, and turned the volume two levels down.

You can probably tell by now, but the person I was talking with on the phone was Manami's little brother " Rock." I immediately began to regret calling him first…

But I pulled myself together and said this.

"Hey, Rock. You really don't need to shout that loud, but do you have a minute?"

"Oh, what a coincidence, An-chan. I had something I wanted your advice on too. How do you get rid of a nickname once it gets attached to you?"

"You can't."

"Instant KO?!"

Having answered Rock's question in an instant, I continued in a harsh tone.

"And don't interrupt someone in the middle of asking you a question with your own problems, dumbass."

"… uh… you sound like you're in a bad mood. Usually you would play along for a bit longer."

Maybe. But, the only reason I called you was to deal with my bad mood in the first place.

"Sorry. I'm not in the mood to play around with you right now. I need you to help me with something first."

"I see. Okay. Hehe… alright, I shall listen to your request."

This bastard, acting so smug about it.

"Unfortunately, I'm not calling to talk with you. Could you put Manami on? For some reason, her cell phone doesn't seem to be on."

"Huh? You need something with my sister? Well, you're out of luck since she's not home."

"What? She's not home? Why? I heard that she didn't come to school today because of a 'situation at home' or something… does this have something to do with that?"

These questions all came out lumped together, but as if evading my questions, Rock answered in an annoying way. With an irritating tone, he said,

"Tch tch tch… Sorry, can't say."

"I see. Next time I see you, maybe I'll try out the Palo Special [41]."

"W-why, An-chan, are you always only making jabs at me?!"

"It's your imagination."

It's not like I was singling him out or something. Rather, I'm being pretty nice to him. He doesn't know the things I say to Kirino, so he can complain like that…

but with Kirino, I had to be three times as forceful as I am with him, or else she wouldn't even give me an inch. It was seriously annoying.

And also, I reacted that way because he was so self-important.

I remained silent, letting him interpret the silence however he wished.

"Ugh… you're seriously in a bad mood… how unusual. But, I mean, it's not like I'm trying to be arrogant or something… I seriously can't say anything about it. My sister told me told me 'if Kyou-chan asks you don't tell him'!"

"… What…?"

What the hell? Manami had anticipated that I was going to come asking about this, and told her brother not to tell me? … Why did she have to do that…? Dammit, I don't like this at all.

… Tch… even though Manami was usually pretty bad with planning ahead…

I felt my mood getting progressively worse.

It was inevitable that I would get angry at Rock in this situation, and I couldn't help myself from getting more aggressive in my questioning.

"Why the hell did she do that?!"

"I-I don't even know! That's all she told me to do… but my sister isn't home right now, and she's taking a bit of a break from school too. That's all I can say!"

"Tch, are you trying to piss me off?! Alright! Fine! Whatever!"

"… You're really in a bad mood right now… you're being really scary."

"Ugh… alright, I'm sorry. I won't get angry anymore."

Trying to calm down the muttering Rock, I continued talking.

If he was told to not tell me anything, then I wouldn't get anything out of him.

"… Well. When is Manami going to come back? You can at least tell me that much, right?"

"Umm… in the evening on the weekend, she said."

So, in three days then.

Until then, Manami wouldn't be in school. I wouldn't be able to see her, and of course, I wouldn't be able to talk with her.

Even though three days wasn't even as long as a week, to me right now, it seemed like a horribly long time. It's not like I liked my childhood friend in that way. If she's not here, I won't be able to study. It was also really annoying that I had to spend these three days not knowing why exactly Manami had been acting so strange lately.

… Yeah, that's all it was.

Well, setting that aside, this business is probably why Manami's been acting so strange lately too.

That might be it, or that might not be it.

In the end, without hearing it from Manami herself, I couldn't come to a definite conclusion myself.

… Hm… let me see if I can approach this in a different way…

"By the way, lately your sister has been acting pretty weird… have you noticed?"

"Hm, now that you mention it, she's seemed a bit down lately… maybe."

"Really? What do you mean by 'lately'? Can you be more specific?"

"I don't think so… it's not like I'm always paying attention to my sister's mood or something…"

"Tch. You're a useless idiot, aren't you."

"Argh, you're seriously being terrible today, An-chan! You're going to make me cry soon!"

Well, sure. After all, I sounded like Kirino just now… dammit, I guess I'm way more annoyed about this than I thought I was.

But if I think about it, I don't always pay attention to my sister either. So here, Rock was acting correctly.

"Sorry, sorry. My bad, Rock. I apologize… so could you try just a bit harder and tell me if you remember anything?

"It's fine… umm… I think that a few days ago, while she was watching Psychic Detective and eating dinner, she really seemed down about something, I think. I can't remember anything from before then though."

"Ah, umm… that was five days ago, maybe? Hold on a second…"

I checked with the television schedule on a newspaper I found, and as I thought that was five days ago.

If I thought back, the first time Manami began to act strangely with me was around three days ago.

And, before that… I had met with Manami… umm… there was a day off in between… yeah, it was the day when we had met Ayase on the way home from school. So, in other words…

Between the time we separated on that day and evening on the same day, something had happened to Manami that put her in a really sad mood…

"Rock… so did anything else happen?"

"Well, that haircut was a pretty big fail, so that was pretty depressing…"

"I'm not talking about you! I'm talking about Manami! I'm asking about your sister!"

"Well… I know, but…"

Liar. He didn't know at all… but I didn't comment.

I had already said that I wouldn't get angry. I really shouldn't keep on breaking my promise like this.

"Hey, speaking of hair, I was thinking that I should buy a wig while my hair is still short."

"You really didn't understand what I said, did you, idiot?! Fine, I'll give you one word of advice, don't even think about doing that! If you suddenly come into school with a full head of hair after being bald, your classmates won't let you live it down!"

"I see… so if I don't do it gradually, I'll get exposed, right?"

"Can we please get back on topic?! I seriously might smack you!"

In the end, I really couldn't get any more useful information out of Rock.

A few days had passed since my conversation with Rock. There weren't many days left before I would have to take my exams.

Ever since that conversation, I hadn't been able to meet with Manami, hadn't been able to ask her why she was acting so strangely… and every day passed by lazily. And I still hadn't made any progress in my studies.

Well, I have an excuse for that. From the start, when I wasn't with Manami, it was difficult for me to study. I knew this wasn't exactly a good thing, so I was pretty nervous at this point…

But honestly, I couldn't muster up even the tiniest bit of motivation.

I would think to myself 'I'll do it later,' and then go surf the net or read manga, and suddenly it would be nighttime.

On the bottom right of the display, I could see the cruel time display showing 0:41.

Uuugh… haaaah… that was supposed to be ten hours of time…

… What the hell happened?

In my room at this time of night, I stared at the computer screen with a painful expression.

But, naturally, the time that had been stolen from me by the Internet could not be returned.

It wasn't supposed to be like this…!

"Ahhh, dammit! This seriously isn't funny! Students should definitely not be allowed to have computers! Your time just gets sucked away so damn fast!"

Unintentionally finding myself yelling to no one in particular, I heard a thud coming from the wall.

It was my sister, who then told me "shut the hell up!" I looked at the wall with a sour expression.

By the way, my relationship with my sister was pretty much the same as always. Occasionally, she would ask about my progress in some eroge or insult me, but other than that we basically didn't talk or make eye contact.

My sister has hated me for quite a long time, and I also really hate that bratty, arrogant girl, so I welcomed the fact that we didn't talk to each other with open arms.

"Geez…"

Feeling as if someone had splashed water in my face, I found my willpower to continue surfing the net fade.

Once again, my thoughts drifted to my childhood friend who had been recently acting strangely.

"Tamura-san probably got a boyfriend, didn't she?" Akagi had made that rash remark, but I could say for sure that his statement couldn't possibly be true.

But, there was no denying that she's seemed down lately, and seemed to be avoiding me.

After that, no matter how many times I thought about it, I couldn't for the life of me think of why Manami

would act that way. In the end, just being bothered by this by myself here didn't lead to any good ideas.

She was definitely being bothered by something. I could say with reasonable certainty that at least that much was true.

She supposedly had a situation at home, and she was also taking off from school.

But it also seemed to be something that Manami didn't want me to know about.

She probably told her brother (and maybe even our homeroom teacher) that when talking with me, they should try to act normally and not tell me anything about this "situation at home."

In that case, maybe I should just not try to do anything here…

At the very least, it seemed that Manami didn't want me to interfere…

No, that conclusion was just unacceptable.

This was bothering me so much that I couldn't possibly study… I tried once again to think about whether or not I could do anything for her.

At this point in time, my reasons for my actions were no longer for Manami's sake.

Nobody was asking me to do this, and I couldn't ask anyone else for help.

To the very end, for my own sake, I thought about what I could do for Manami.

So… I wasn't able to meet with Manami herself, I already knew that her younger brother wouldn't be of much help, my female classmates didn't seem to know anything, and asking Akagi was out of the question…

Including myself, there wasn't a single person around me that I could depend on for this matter.

"… Hm."

Was there anybody else that I could ask for help on this matter, that would actually be able to give me some useful ideas…? Maybe someone I knew that I hadn't

thought about yet… hm… someone who didn't think in the same way I did… someone who understood how girls thought… And also, someone who could keep a secret and wasn't a gossip.

First off… well, I had already tried the first person I could think of, Manami's brother Rock, and that effort had proven pretty fruitless.

I could also try my father… but that wouldn't work. He would never gossip, and he would definitely listen to me, but you could tell just by looking at him that he was too rough and unrefined to understand the female heart. My mother, as you would expect, excelled at these kind of things, but she was way too loose-lipped to be trusted. Ugh…

So… that would leave…

"……."

I contemplated it for almost a minute, and finally with a exceedingly complex set of feelings, narrowed my eyes.

There did exist someone. Only one person… Someone who would listen to me seriously, someone who understood girls, someone who would never gossip

about this with anyone else, someone who might be able to give me useful advice…

But… that person was… that person was… ugh…

As I thought of the most suitable person for this job, I felt my determination wavering…

Deep wrinkles formed on my forehead, and I groaned.

… This might be exactly how she felt last month.

After all, no matter how much it pained me to do so, I was about to lay out one of my secrets to someone who I hated so much.

When I thought about it that way, my hesitation slowly disappeared.

I mean, if she can do something like that, then there's no reason I shouldn't be able to as well.

"Alright."

Making up my mind, I slowly turned my gaze to the wall.

On the other side of that wall was Kirino's room.

I decided to ask my sister for advice. Becoming resolute, I wanted to take action as soon as possible while my determination was still there. I found myself standing right outside the door to Kirino's room.

It was already really late, but when she came asking me for advice it was also in the middle of the night, so I was just doing the same thing that she had done.

Thinking back to that dreadful incident, I remembered that in the middle of the night, even though I had been sleeping soundly, she had smacked me awake… I was completely confused at what was going on. When I asked her what she wanted, she told me "I told you to be quiet. How late do you think it is?" And what's more, without letting me respond she told me "I need to talk so come with me."

She wouldn't listen to my complaints that I was sleepy and we should do whatever she wanted the next day, and wouldn't even tell me why she woke me up…

Seriously, in this world, is there any big brother who is as nice as I am, who would listen to his little sister's request like that?

I'm seriously a saint. If I were my little sister, I would have fallen in love with me a long time ago. It would be a straight line to one of the good endings. [42]

So, let's put this plan into action. No longer hesitating, I began to turn the doorknob to my sister's room.

Click

It was locked.

"… Ugh. Life is pretty unfair…"

I mean, seriously. My room didn't have a lock installed , but my sister's room had one.

Last year her room kept on being redecorated, and so became much better than my room, even though I'm the eldest.

Dammit! I won't get frustrated about this!

Facing the door to my sister's room, I pointlessly grit my teeth.

Feeling annoyance wash over me, I continued to turn the knob with a rattle rattle. As if the bastard door detected my impending hostility, it fired back first.

Bang! Suddenly, the door swung forcefully open, and hit me right in the face.

"Guaaaaaaaaah…!!" I held my face through the agony. In my pain, I crouched down. "Ugh… oww~~…" I sounded pretty pitiful, if I say so myself.

As my field of vision blurred with tears, I looked upwards and saw…

"……"

Seeming like she was looking at some piece of garbage by the roadside, Kirino stood over me.

She was dressed roughly, wearing a pair of short pants with a shirt.

Whoaa… what a cold stare…

'It's not even worth saying anything to you at this point' she seemed to want to say.

Silently, she waited for me to tell her what I wanted.

Wiping my tears with my shirt, I stood back up.

Still rather confused because of the pain, I pulled myself together and acted like nothing was wrong, deciding to say what I had prepared beforehand. I would try to say it as suavely as possible.

Fufu… I had predicted how my sister would react to me suddenly coming to her room, so I had prepared an appropriate response. It was a response that my sister had used before, filled with the same level of sarcasm. What response, you ask?

"Be quiet… exactly what time do you think it is?"

"……."

Unexpectedly, my statement seemed to have backfired .

I don't think I've ever sounded quite as lame as I just did.

Kirino expressionlessly shut the door. Click. I heard the sound of the door locking.

"I'm sorry. Please open the door."

She didn't open it. I waited ten seconds, then a minute, and she still didn't open the door.

Although, I probably wouldn't have opened the door in her position either.

Well, no use complaining about the situation. Still rubbing my face to deal with the lingering pain, I began to knock. Knock knock, knock knock, knock knock, knock knock…

After continuing to knock for six or seven minutes, it seemed that Kirino had finally run out of patience, and she opened the door forcefully once again. As I began to mentally celebrate my victory, she sent a few extremely threatening words my way.

"What? What do you want? Do you like pissing people off or something? Huh?"

"I have something I need to talk to you about. Come with me for a bit."

Kirino let me get away with saying that to her, but when I thought about it I realized something.

Those weren't exactly words you said to someone who was already angry.

Kirino's response was pretty much exactly how I had responded in her position months ago.

"Huh? You want to talk? At this hour?"

"Yes."

"Ah, I see. Go die."

Finally saying what she was planning on saying in the first place, Kirino tried to forcibly end the conversation by closing the door again. But, I managed to just barely shove my leg into the door before she closed it. Bam! my tiptoe was jammed in the door.

"J-just listen to what I have to say…"

"I don't want to… you're being stubborn, aren't you? Why do I have to listen to you?"

"I-I mean, I listened to you back then too…"

"Are you an idiot? That was that and this is this."

What cruel logic. I already guessed that she might say something like that, but that didn't make it any less cruel.

Also, my leg hurt like a bitch! It seriously hurt!

Bastard… usually in this situation, the other person would stop trying to force the door closed…

Dammit! I had imagined something like this would happen, but why do I have to go through so much pain just to get her to listen to me?! If I were her, I would have agreed to listen a long time ago already!

"Aagh, come on! Can't you just be reasonable?!"

"Oogh…."

I was also getting a bit stubborn here, so I held my ground even though I should have probably already given up.

"Please! All you have to do is listen! You're the only one who I can talk to about this!"

"……"

My desperate plea might have had some effect, since the pressure on my foot weakened. These words weren't just some ploy to get her to listen to me, but they were honestly partially my true feelings.

"… What…? You mean… you mean that… you want my advice on something?"

"Yeah, exactly. I wanted to say that from the start… my bad?"

"Yes, your bad."

Instant response. But Kirino didn't end there, and with an extremely annoyed tone, continued.

"Yes, your bad… but, well, this is annoying, so I'll listen to you for five minutes only. Be grateful."

What an arrogant person.

I see… even though now the giver and the taker have switched positions, our positions with respect to each other have not changed at all.

Well, whatever, at least we're getting somewhere now.

Hmph, I honestly didn't think that there would ever be a day where I would go to my sister for advice.

"Come in quickly. I don't want to go into your filthy room."

"Yeah yeah, as you command."

"Huh? What's with that attitude? Aren't you being a bit rude to the kind person who's giving you advice?"

It must be nice being able to put yourself up so high on a pedestal!

And well, so it came to be that I stepped into the life advice room of Kousaka Kirino.

I thought back a few months.

When I was being cross-examined by my father, Kirino had stubbornly refused to reveal that I had been her accomplice in her crime.

And in regards to her modeling job, it wasn't play at all, but a serious job for very professional people. I knew

that she had made a promise with my father to keep up her schoolwork and athletics while doing the job on the side.

Her stubbornly firm personality was probably something she inherited from our strict father.

She was more tightlipped, resolved, and well-versed in matters of the female mind than anyone I knew.

Somehow or other, after the events of last month, I began to have a certain amount of faith in Kirino in various respects.

Although, of course, the fact that I really hated her still hadn't changed.

The light was on in my sister's room. It's not like I cared, but if you looked at her in a lit place, my little sister's face did look pretty cute. Only her face though.

As always, there was a strange sweet smell in the air, and red seemed to be the predominant color in the room.

Kirino sat quietly on the bed, and pointed to the floor.

"Hey, sit there."

Is it just me, or did these positions make it seem like I was a criminal and she was the judge…?

Of course, even if I mentioned that to her she wouldn't care.

Obediently doing as my sister had instructed, I sat on the floor on her cat shaped cushion. At that moment, Kirino raised her eyebrows, seeming displeased. She probably really didn't want me touching her things.

… I won't say anything else on that end. After all, I came here especially to ask her to help me.

Kirino crossed her arms arrogantly, and coldly jerked her chin up.

"Well? What do you need advice on?"

"Ahh.. well… that is…"

When I tried to begin talking about my problem, my mouth stopped moving.

Was it really alright to be asking her for advice? My mind began to hesitate.

I knew that this was a pretty late stage in the game to be thinking like this, but… well, that's how I felt.

"Hey… what are you mumbling about?"

"Well, umm… that is… do you promise not to make fun of me?"

It wasn't like I was trying to copy her from before. I just naturally spurted that out.

This wasn't a pleasant situation, but in the end, we were brother and sister, right? Incidentally, last month, when my sister asked me the same thing, I responded "I will definitely not make fun of you" in a super cool way.

Kirino's response ran like this.

"Of course I'll make fun of you. Come on, quickly. You 're wasting the precious time that I'm sparing for your sake."

I wasn't sure if I should fault her for her cruelty or if I should applaud her for her honesty.

I dropped my shoulders sadly, but I made up my mind. She had already told me beforehand that she'll

make fun of me, so there's nothing to be frightened about anymore.

You could call it positive thinking or resigned acceptance. Either way, I slowly opened my mouth.

"Well, honestly… it's about Manami."

"Huh? What are you talking about? This isn't about some special hobby you couldn't tell anyone else about?"

"No! Who the hell do you think I am?!"

And plus, she really shouldn't be applying her own standards here. Certainly, the life advice session last month was unbearable beyond belief, but to the end that was the "little sister" asking the "older brother" for help, so there was some line of propriety that we could apply to that situation. Whether or not we crossed that line or not is a separate issue.

But if we switched positions, that would be terrible, wouldn't it?! Try to imagine it, if we went through last month's events with our positions switched.

The "high schooler older brother" takes his "junior high schooler younger sister" into "his own room" in the

"middle of the night" and says "The truth is, I really like little sister eroge. What should I do?"

And seriously, this isn't about eroge in the first place! What kind of insane older brother would actually talk about eroge like this?!

Just imagining talking about eroge like this made me want to kill myself.

"Ugh…"

I'm getting a bit too worked up here… (even though I didn't say a word out loud yet).

"Well, what is it? … Do you need love advice about her or something?"

"No, not that either. We're not involved in some sort of love affair like that."

"… Huh? Even though you two cling to each other enough to make me gag?"

What an unpleasant thing to say, even though she doesn't really know about our relationship. I found myself suddenly getting annoyed, and I responded.

"What exactly do you think you know about my relationship with Manami?"

"As always, whenever we start talking about that girl, you get annoyed…"

Kirino spoke, looking irritated.

… She seriously hates Manami, doesn't she? I have no idea why. I mean, she's barely ever even talked to Manami, so why is she talking about Manami as if she had something against her?

"Certainly, I don't know too much about your gross relationship with her. So why are you coming here to ask me about her? Are you an idiot?"

"I was hoping to get your opinion as a girl. I'm a boy, so I'm pretty thickheaded about these types of things. I thought that you might be able to understand the situation in a way I can't…"

"… I see."

Looking at me with a scornful expression, Kirino swung her crossed legs bak and forth.

"I see. Go ahead. I'll listen."

"Ahh. So, honestly… lately, she's been acting strangely …"

I told Kirino about how Manami had seemed pretty depressed as of late, and how she might be avoiding me.

"And then, what happened was…"

Kirino suddenly interrupted me mid-sentence.

"Hold on. Rewind for a second."

"Huh? … Um, to where?"

"The time when you came home with her, give me a few more details there."

"A-ahh…"

It seemed that something about that time set off Kirino 's sensors.

So, I went back and spoke about that time when Manami and I had met Ayase on our way back home.

But for some reason, I didn't actually bring up Ayase's name.

… Well, it's not like there was any reason to, in any case.

Also, if I had exposed that detail this situation might get a bit more complicated… so I didn't mind leaving it out.

After that, I continued and talked about my conversation with Rock a few days ago.

"… So that's what happened… what do you think?"

"I think you should die."

Her sudden response felt like a knife in my chest, and I began to protest with a "Hey…." But, Kirino didn't flinch at all. "Well, in all seriousness though…" she continued.

"I don't know what exactly is going on at her house, but… I do know one thing. You should go die."

Looking into my sister's eyes, I could feel the temperature sharply drop. Kirino continued.

"How in hell didn't you notice this before? Having your appearance being made fun of by the guy you're walking home with, and then being compared to another girl… that would obviously depress any girl."

"I wasn't making fun of her! And I smoothed it over afterwards too!"

"It doesn't matter why you said what you said. The important thing is how she takes it. Also, keep in mind that I really don't know what you're relationship with her is. This is just what I would think if I were in that situation. Well, of course, if it were me, before I got depressed over it, I would put the guy in his place first for screwing around. Also, what? You smoothed it over? You already said these words once, and you think you can take them back that easily? You're an idiot if you think that's true."

"……."

That was pretty harsh, but… I silently mulled over Kirino's words.

So, Manami was depressed because of what I had said back then…?

Was that it? Certainly she looked pretty sad and mentioned that she should "try harder" with her own appearance, but… I thought that my attempts at smoothing the situation over had been successful.

Also, it's not like that was the first time Manami and I had had a conversation like this.

Although, in the past, I had once told her "You smell like tatami. It's like grass is going to start growing on your body or something." And suddenly she started crying.

In retrospect, I do feel like I had really hurt her feelings that time.

Hm… but when all's said and done, I'm still not fully satisfied here. This explanation also didn't seem to be connected at all to any situation she was having at home …

But, there wasn't anything else I could think of that would explain all this, so let's just see what we can do with this one hypothesis.

"Well, for argument's sake, let's say you're right… what should I do?"

"I told you, you should go die."

"Something other than that!"

Ugh, this person. She has absolutely no compassion for her brother, does she? Not even a shred of compassion. Why did I come to her for advice? Suddenly, I couldn't understand my reasons anymore…

After I asked her for some advice other than telling me to go die, Kirino looked troubled. "Tch… that's a hard question…"

… It honestly seemed like she thought the best answer she could give me was to "go die."

Not being able to bear this for much longer, I opened my mouth to try to at least come up with some ideas.

"What would you do… in my situation? For example … if I made you angry, what should I do to be forgiven?"

"I would never forgive you."

"Just assume there is a way and think about it!"

"Eh… but seriously, no matter what you did I wouldn't forgive you."

Kirino stared blankly at me and blinked her eyes in confusion.

She said that as if it were the most natural thing in the world…

Don't put on such a cute expression here, dammit. I won't fall for it.

When I faced her with a stern stare, Kirino shook her head, with a "I guess it can't be helped…"

"How should I put it… I definitely wouldn't forgive you no matter what you did. But what if I just thought about this from the standpoint of a normal girl?"

"Well, alright. Please do. How does a guy deal with a girl when he's hurt her?"

This would be the opinion of a real junior high school girl. Everyone should also pay attention.

"I think you should give her some money. Something like that."

"Money?! You want me to give Manami money as an apology?!"

"It's the sincerest way to let know you're sorry and to compensate her, isn't it?"

"It's not like I'm the government or something!! Do you really think that kind of thing would be able to heal a girl's heart?!"

"It's not like I think like that… but from what I've heard, isn't that the case? My friend once told me 'When I get presents from guys, the more money I can turn them into, the happier I am.'"

"… Who the hell could be so evil? She's just trampling their pure feelings under her foot!"

"You mean, Kanako? She was the short girl who came over that day."

Her?! She was the girl who was spewing those terrible insults about me! Now I can see where Kirino's advice was coming from all too clearly.

"… Kirino, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to reject that proposal. No matter how I think about it, giving Manami money won't help the situation."

"… What? How can that girl be so greedy?"

"That's not what I mean!"

She needs to understand that Manami honors a completely different set of values.

After all, Manami wasn't the type who would care much about money.

When I invited her to hang out with me wherever she wanted to, she suggested we go to the park, didn't she?

If I really gave her expensive makeup or jewelry, instead of being happy she might actually be really troubled by it.

"Ah, well whatever. Just do what you want. Your five minutes are up, so get out."

Kirino began to shoo me out with her hands.

"Yeah yeah…"

Heh… it was a mistake coming to her for advice after all, wasn't it? Picking myself up from the floor, I headed towards the door.

… In the end, I wasn't able to get any good advice from her… what should I do…"

"But, hey."

Having already gripped the doorknob in my hands, I heard a voice come from behind me.

"You might think that you're trying to bribe her with a present or something… but it's really not about what you give her. The more important thing is that you're doing something for her sake, don't you think?"

Kirino was muttering nonchalantly, as if she were completely spaced out, but her words stuck right into my chest.

"…..nn…. mm…"

When I nervously turned back towards her, Kirino slowly stood up, and took out a single magazine from her bookshelf. She casually tossed the magazine my way.

It landed at my feet, and I stared at it. Kirino spoke curtly.

"Look. Feature on page 175."

I guess she wanted me to pick the magazine up and flip to that page or something…

Feeling a bit intimidated by my sister's haughty attitude, I did as she ordered.

When I opened to that feature page, I saw the title jump out at me with its large font.

Summer Special Edition – You have to have these! [43] With our magical charm items, become a Cinderella by the beach!

What the hell… what's with this annoyingly extreme article?

There was a sparkling rosary-like bracelet, and earrings, and…

Wearing those really flashy accessories, the brown haired swim-suit model shown in front of me, making a cool pose by the beachside, was none other than my sister. Next to her, Ayase sported a blue bikini.

This must be the sample magazine that Ayase was talking about the other day.

… This was an article that modern junior high girls would take a liking to, probably.

How cute.

Well? What was she trying to tell me? Why is she making me look at a photo of her in a swimsuit?

When I looked at my little sister, puzzled, she lightly clicked her tongue.

"It's not like I'm telling you to give that plain-looking girl such flashy accessories. No matter how you look at it, they really wouldn't suit her. Tch… well? I mean, magazines and TV programs always have these fashion special features and they try to stir girls up into buying these things, but if you think girls can't think for themselves and just drink this all up, then you're completely wrong. Don't take girls lightly. And I mean, of course girls worry about fashion and things like that, but they also have to think about what suits them the best, and what looks the best on them. When it comes down to it, I obviously know myself much better than the media knows me."

Even though she was a magazine model, she was strangely critical of the article that she was featured in.

But also… she got completely off topic there, didn't she…? She was seriously hopeless when it came to talking.

As if guessing what I was thinking, Kirino clumsily tried to wrap up what she was talking about.

"I-I mean… what I wanted to say is… um, you want to tell her your feelings, but you're obsessed with thinking about whether or not giving her money or presents is right or wrong. But really, all you have to do is to think hard about her, and then choose a way to fix this situation. That's all."

Finishing her speech, Kirino once again sent a serious look my way.

"At least… if someone gets a present from a person she's close enough to have an argument with… there's no reason she wouldn't be happy about it."

"… Does that also apply to you? Or rather, does that only work for average girls?"

"Huh?"

My tone was slightly rude… but she was probably serious.

Certainly, she hated her brother from the bottom of her heart, and had a terrible, sickening personality.

But, she wouldn't give a half-hearted response to someone who came to her asking her sincerely for advice

. In contrast to her outwards appearance, perhaps through strict discipline and training, she really did have a strangely tough interior.

I had already come to understand that from how she acted during last month's events.

And that's why I came to her about my troubles.

Hm…

Giving her a light nod, I spoke.

"Thanks, Kirino."

"Hmph."

Kirino coldly faced the other way. There was no mistaking that, towards her brother who had expressed his thanks so suavely, she was thinking…

My brother can't possibly be this cute.

… As if.

In the end, I still really didn't know why Manami had been in such a strange mood lately. Earlier, Kirino had

pointed out Manami might be depressed because I had compared her with Ayase, but I didn't know if that was really the real reason or not. So right now, one thing I didn't understand is why Manami had been acting this way.

Also, I still didn't know if she really was trying to avoid me or not.

In any case… Manami would be back tomorrow.

When I met with her in person, I would have to make sure she told me the whole story.

But, if something was really bothering her, then I wanted to do something to help. I wanted to help cheer her up.

And if I really had done something wrong, then I wanted to sincerely apologize.

At any rate, this was about Manami. For me, I couldn't treat this nonchalantly like I had with Kirino's friends, as if this had nothing to do with me. Manami had helped me out a lot in the past, and I planned to rely on her in the future as well.

In that case, it wouldn't be bad if I got her a present, right?

Yes, a present. Obviously, I wouldn't just give her cash or anything too high-class… but if giving her something would make her happy, certainly this wasn't a bad idea, was it? And I mean, it's not like I had any better ideas.

When I had thanked Kirino earlier, I was expressing my true feelings. In the end, she gave me some very valuable advice. At the very least, that's how I saw it.

… That is, she told me that it didn't matter what I bought her, but it was enough to do something for Manami.

That I wanted to tell her how I felt, but I was fixating on whether or not giving her a present was right or wrong. That all I had to do was think hard about her, and then choose a way to fix this situation.

… That generally, if someone gets a present from someone she was close enough with to argue with… there's no reason she wouldn't be happy about it.

In this case, it's not like we were arguing or something … and Manami and I weren't strangers. But…

… Yeah. No matter what was troubling Manami, this might make her feel just a bit better. Even if she really was trying to avoid me.

If this could make her happy, then it wouldn't be a waste, right?

I really didn't like seeing her so unhappy like this.

"Yeah… that's it. That's it."

She had always helped me study, and even if she wasn 't going to do that anymore, I should at least get her something. That's what I decided…

"Hm. What should I get her…?"

It seemed that a new problem had come into sight. Manami's frugal nature was rather troublesome in this case. I couldn't really imagine what I could possibly get her that would make her happy.

If I were buying a present for Kirino or Kirino's friends , I would buy something as expensive as possible, and I could figure that out by consulting both my own budget

and a store clerk… and I did have quite a bit saved up. After all, it's not like I have much to spend my money on.

Umm… things that Manami would like, things that she would want…

Tea? Candy? … No no, those are things her family sells.

Well… glasses? Clothes? I felt that these were probably not right either… they were too expensive, and might make her feel uncomfortable… I had to find a present that wasn't expensive enough that it would make her embarrassed…

"Hm……."

I couldn't figure anything out for a long time, but at least, I had a flash of insight from something Manami had said in the past.

–"Hey, lately I've been sleeping with this bear-shaped body pillow. It's reaaally comfortable."

–"I'm collecting pillows right now."

"… So… a pillow?"

At my own words, I tilted my head In puzzlement. I really didn't have much confidence that a pillow was an appropriate present for a girl.

For example, what if I gave a pillow to Kirino?

"Hey, Kirino. This is a present for you… it's a pillow."

"Die."

It would definitely be like that. But, I was dealing with Manami here, not Kirino… so maybe this would be good … that's what I thought, even though I didn't really have an ounce of confidence in my idea.

Even so, I was supposed to be the person who should know Manami the best. If the present I got her was wrong, then it's doubtful that anybody could get her an appropriate present. Right?

"Alright, a pillow, then. Let's get her a pillow."

Quickly reviving my computer from standby [44], I began to look up prices for her present on the Internet. I got the idea to try the pillow site I had found before.

Manami was, in the end, a girl, so she probably really liked character pillows… so let's take a look at those. [45]

I guess computers weren't originally just tools for killing time. They also could be used at times like this [46]. For the first time since I had gotten it, I felt comforted by this computer that Kirino had lent me.

It was the evening Manami was supposed to return.

I was standing on a road right next to the Tamura house, leaning on a concrete wall, and staring up at the sky.

"So hot…"

I narrowed my eyes in the sunlight of this pretty summer day. I wiped the sweat off my face with a handkerchief.

It was hot beyond belief. It was already evening, but the temperature was so high that I could still see the top of the telephone poles around me distorting in the heat.

… I might have come too early…

That's what I was thinking. But, I couldn't help it, could I? I really wanted to see Manami as soon as possible.

But… waiting around like this was making me increasingly anxious…

Even though Rock had told me Manami would be coming back this evening, I wondered if she really would be… I also wondered about what I would say to her when I saw her… and what I would do if she still was trying to avoid me…

"Agh… dammit… how pitiful…"

My mind wouldn't stop turning. Thoughts of Manami seemed to relentlessly swirl around in my head.

My handkerchief had already taken in so much sweat that it had become sticky. I thought about going to buy some juice, but thinking that in that time, Manami might come back, I couldn't move an inch from where I was.

You might think that it would be better if I went into the house and waited for her there, but for some reason I didn't want to do that. There's no reason for it. Honestly, none. But, I just wanted to wait for her out here.

At the very least, if I did this, I could see her face a few seconds earlier.

After that, I waited for around ten more minutes, and then…

Soon, I saw Manami appear around the corner. She came lugging a heavy-looking trunk behind her, yelling out "yoisho!" in self-encouragement every time she took a step.

And occasionally, she would stop and wipe off the sweat from her face.

"____"

In a second, a number of various feelings passed through my chest.

Worry, loneliness, irritation, nostalgia, and also… well …

In my confusion, I couldn't really describe this feeling in one word, but… it was probably a feeling closest to relief.

When I was next to her, I couldn't help but feel relieved. That was true even now, even though I was afraid that she might be trying to avoid me.

You could say that this was an immutable behavior that had been slowly etched into me over the years. You could also call it a conditioned reflex.

Hah… seriously, I'm so lost when she's not around.

It would be great if I could fix whatever had happened between us. I really thought that.

I casually raised a hand in greeting, trying as hard as possible to make it seem like everything was normal.

"Hey, welcome back."

"Wha-whaaa?"

She probably was surprised because when she rounded the corner, suddenly I was there.

Widening her eyes, Manami looked shocked.

"K-Kyou-chan… what are you doing here…? How did you know that I was coming back today…? Umm… could it be… that you were waiting here for a long time for me…?"

"Hm? It's not like that, no."

Well, honestly though, I've been here for around two hours.

"I mean… I just… wanted to see you."

"…Uh… a-ahh…"

For some reason, Manami looked embarrassed as she mumbled something under her breath. She looked really confused, so I spoke up while scratching my cheek.

"Ah… did you not want to see me?"

"N-no, it's not like that. N-not at all…"

When I tried to get a good peek at her face, Manami suddenly turned her head downwards. What's more, as if she were trying to run away from me, she began to

slowly move backwards with her trunk. She looked like a teary-eyed puppy who had just lost a fight with a bigger dog.

… Geez.

I had hoped that when she came back, everything would return to normal… but it didn't seem like that was going to happen. Manami's mood seemed just as strange as it was before.

Dammit. This wasn't normal at all. This wasn't like how we usually acted towards each other.

Alright…

Making up my mind, I held out my hand. And then, I firmly caught Manami by the wrist.

I had already prepared myself to do things I didn't want to do, and I definitely couldn't let her run away from me here.

And then, I started pleading with her with a pitiable tone of voice.

"Hold on, wait wait wait… please don't run away."

"I'm… not trying to run away…"

Liar. If that's true, why won't you even look at me? If everything were normal, you would send me a pleasant smile instead, wouldn't you? That's what you would do when you talked with me.

Agh… dammit, what should I do? I had thought about plenty of things I could start the conversation with, but I couldn't remember any of them. It felt like I had failed cramming for a test or something…

"Has something been… bothering you lately?"

I had no choice but to get straight to the issue. It was an amazingly blunt way to start.

"Huh? Huuuh?"

As if I had hit the bulls-eye, Manami raised her head.

But, immediately afterwards, she turned her heads downwards once again.

"W-why do you ask? N-nothing's been bothering me. Ahaha…"

She was absolutely terrible at playing dumb like this. Even worse than Kirino.

But… I see… as I thought, something was bothering her. And what's more, it was something she didn't want to talk to me about. It was perfectly clear, as I watched her desperately trying to hide whatever it was she was trying to hide, that she didn't want me to ask her about this.

In other words, Manami didn't need my help right now.

I didn't want to admit it, but that's how things seemed.

It's just, I couldn't consent to leaving this alone so easily here. No matter what.

I might be repeating myself, but I really wanted to just do something for her, to help her out of this.

If I couldn't do that, at the very least I wanted to cheer her up. It wasn't for anyone else's sake, but just for my own. To the very end, I was just acting selfishly out of my own self-interest.

So, therefore, she might not want me to, but I can't let this conversation end here. I sincerely bowed my head.

"… Sorry."

"Eh…? K-kyou-chan?"

Manami's voice sounded rather confused.

She was probably surprised at my sudden apology.

"'I don't quite know what's bothering you… but I can tell that whatever it is, you don't want to talk to me about it. But, I can't let that go. No matter how much you say it doesn't have anything to do with me and refuse my help, I can't just stand by and pretend nothing is happening."

"So, you mean…"

"At some point, you also said something like that to me, right?"

For just a second, Manami, wide-eyed, made eye contact with me. In the next second, she once again turned her eyes away.

"D-did I?"

"Yes, you did. It's always been like that. Whenever I've been tired, you've always interfered and meddled in my business. Even though I didn't ask you to."

I gave a strained smile while thinking back to those pleasant times. Yes, whenever I got like that, she would come to my rescue. So, this was just me giving her the same thing back.

"That's… I mean… I just can't leave Kyou-chan alone."

"I know. You seem more like my mother than my own mother sometimes."

"… So, by that, do you mean you love me?"

Manami asked that with a slightly downtrodden tone of voice.

A different response from before spontaneously burst forth from my mouth.

"Yeah."

"E-ehhh?!?!?!"

Manami's body began to tremble in surprise.

"Ah… n-no, not like that. That's not what I mean… argh, dammit… ummm… I might have responded too quickly… I mean that you're like family… umm…"

Idiot! What the hell am I saying?!

Did standing for two hours in this damn heat scramble my brains or something?!

As I desperately tried to clear up any misunderstandings, Manami, staring at me all the while, began to chuckle. She wiped a few tears from the side of her eyes with her finger.

"Geez… Kyou-chan… you're the same as always."

"……. Ugh…….. look who's talking…."

"……. But…… I did change."

Stopping her giggling, Manami looked downwards once again.

If nothing had changed, then here we would start laughing together at each other, and then that would be the end of the problem.

… But, I guess she's right. You could say that lately, she's "changed."

Even though I honestly didn't want things to change like this…

The silence stretched out for a little while longer.

In that silence, I thought about my childhood friend, who was standing in front of me.

We had known each other for longer than ten years. There were still probably things that we didn't know about each other… but I probably knew Manami better than anybody else, and she me.

But I grew used to that kind of relationship, and I grew complacent. And if, because of that, I didn't realize it when I hurt Manami… then just like my sister had said, I really should just go and die.

They say that even with good friends there are good manners, and there's really no reason that our good

relationship could continue forever unconditionally. So, to keep our friendship for as long as possible, I had to try my best.

That's what I came to understand.

Somehow or other, this was something I had to come to accept.

"… The something that's bothering you… is it my fault ? Was I the reason you changed…? Am I why you've seemed so sad lately, why you've seemed like you've been avoiding me…? If I did something bad to you, I apologize. So, please. Just tell me what's going on."

"Whaaa?!?!?!"

Upon hearing what I had to say, Manami shouted in protest and waved her hands back and forth.

"N-no! T-that's completely wrong! I-It's really not like K-Kyou-chan did something like that to me!"

"Eh?! R-really?"

"Yes! Where did you come up with such a ridiculous idea?!"

Manami strongly protested my statement with an unexpectedly loud voice.

It seemed like my words might have even angered her.

I faltered a bit at her angry look, but even then I felt relieved. I heard that I wasn't the cause of my childhood friend's problems, straight from the person herself.

… But I couldn't stop here. This means that her troubles came from some other source.

"But, honestly, you've been acting strangely lately, right? And… you said that you changed, right? Is that why you've been avoiding me…? What's your reason for doing that?"

When I asked this, Manami bashfully fiddled with her fingers and blushed.

"Well… that is… that time when I came back with Kyou-chan… that time when we met that girl, do you remember…?"

And, like that, with her glasses almost completely clouded over, my childhood friend began her explanation.

"Y-your bangs?"

"Y-yeah…"

What Manami ended up telling me was completely beyond my expectations, and filled me with surprise.

"The day we met that girl, right…? I… After I went home, I cut my hair… but… that is… I sort of failed at doing that… my bangs came out uneven… and when I tried to fix that, it just got worse and worse… a-and eventually, there wasn't really anything more I could do to fix it…"

Reminiscing on that day, I remembered that Manami was close to tears.

"Even though you complimented me that day… I changed like this… and then, I didn't even want to go to school, and waited until the last possible second to leave the house." [47]

"… And then, you didn't want to show me your face."

Is that why she seemed like she was avoiding me?

"… Yeah."

Looking completely dispirited, Manami sniffled.

It was like we were in some shounen manga, and the heroine who had been turned into a monster was confessing her dirty secret to the protagonist, or something.

I still was a bit stumped by what was going on, but for now I should deal with the remaining questions I had, and so I went through them in order.

"So… this all happened because of that time we met Ayase…?"

"… What do you mean?"

Blinking her tear-stricken eyes, Manami cocked her head to the side in confusion.

What?

"T-then… when I called your cell phone, it seemed like your phone was off…"

"Huh? You called me…? Sorry, I left for a while to go to a relative's house…"

"No, I called your cell phone though."

"… I don't really leave the house with my cell phone. I 'm afraid of losing it…"

Then what's the point of a cell phone? That's seriously something I'd expect an old person to say.

I was seriously troubled when I couldn't reach her by phone, though.

"W-well… what about this 'situation at home' they told me about at school?"

"A-ah, that. I went to my relative's house, they run a store out of their house too, to help out. Their grandmother… well she's fine now in any case… she was hospitalized…"

"I… see… B-but, you even told your brother not to tell me about this. He told me that you told him that if I asked about this to not tell me anything… why did you do that?"

Because of that, my suspicions that I had done something bad to you grew stronger…

"Huh?" Manami widened her eyes, and then looked downhearted, as if she had made some major blunder.

"It's not what you think! That time, I didn't know what the condition of that relative was… if her condition worsened and this situation got worse… well, Kyou-chan would worry about me… so I told him 'Until we know about her condition, even if he asks you, don't tell Kyou-chan anything, alright?'"

"I… see…"

I see. When Manami started taking off from school because of some "situation at home," even normally, I would probably go to Rock to ask about the situation. And if I heard that one of Manami's relatives had been hospitalized and so on, of course I would be worried. Thinking about Manami's feelings, I would feel pretty downhearted.

So she decided to not tell me anything.

But in this case, her plan backfired. Not only did the person she entrusted to tell me say suggestive things, but he explained his sister's intentions rather carelessly.

So, that means…

The "situation at home" and the "thing that's bothering Manami" were two separate things…

"So, you weren't angry because… I had made fun of your face…?"

"Like I said, there's no reason I would do that. I mean … that time, Kyou-chan told me that he liked me the way I was, right…? That you like me [48] this way, even more than you liked that girl… you made me really, really happy."

D-did I really say something like that…? If I try to remember, I guess some words that resembled those came out of my mouth… but wasn't the nuance a bit different the way she said it?

Hey hey, what kind of smug idiot would say such embarrassing words without the least reservation? I would? Really?

Incredibly bewildered, I watched as Manami gave me a loose smile, looking quite happy.

"… That's why… there's no reason for me to be mad at Kyou-chan…"

"I-I see…"

Well, I couldn't help but feel embarassed, so with great effort I turned my thoughts elsewhere.

U-umm. So that means… all in all, this was a one person sumo match…?

Was that really the reason you seemed so troubled…? I was speechless, but I wanted to say that [49].

So, probably, because she had changed her hairstyle even though I had told her that I liked her the way she was, that's why she was so worried, right?

And she was so depressed about it that she didn't even want to come to school?

What a huge idiot. What an unbelievably huge idiot. Just listening to her here made tears well up in my eyes.

Was I mistaken? That she had such a ridiculous reason for all of this…

… But also…

"So… where is it? Where did you cut off too much?"

"Umm….. H-here. See, here… isn't it weird looking?"

I mean, even if she points to it with such a miserable expression…

"Haah… I'm really sad about this change…"

At the same time that Manami dropped her shoulders, I sadly did the same. T-this person…

Even if she says that she cut off too much, I can't see it at all…

And first and foremost, certainly, I did tell her that I liked her the way she was.

But there's no reason I would get angry or hate it if she just changed her hairstyle.

… Geez, I really didn't understand these girls who took these small things so seriously…

Well, it seems that everything was alright, so I'm relieved. I'm seriously relieved. With this, from tomorrow we can return to how everything was. We can go to school together, study together, go home together, and eat sweets together…

Buhaha! Do you see, Akagi?! She didn't have a boyfriend at all! Serves you right!

….. Wha? But, how should I put it… there was something else…

As I thought back on the conversation I exchanged with Manami's brother a few days ago, the person in question showed up.

He probably spied Manami and I talking outside.

He leaned outside from the second floor window of the Manami house.

"HEYO! Welcome home Nee-chan!!"

He waved his hand energetically.

He then went back into the room, and soon flew out of the house entryway.

“Nee-chan Nee-chan Nee-chan Nee-chan! I got my allowance today! And I went out and bought a wig for you! Don’t worry don’t worry, it’s one that only covers a part of your head! So people definitely won’t figure it out ! This wig… oh!”

It was Rock. He ran towards us with noisy footsteps, and when he realized I was there he raised his voice enthusiastically.

“OH! If it isn’t An-chan! Hey!!”

“Hey…. Good timing, Rock. Come here for a sec.”

As I beckoned him to come with my hands, the idiot rushed over like some over-eager dog. “What, what? Do you have something for me?”

When that baldie came within attack range, I quickly put him in a headlock and tightened my arms around his neck.

"You bald asshole! Bastard… you knew from the beginning what was bothering Manami!"

"Ahhhhhh! That hurts! B-but I said it already! I said ' Well, the haircut went overboard' didn't I?! You're the one who wouldn't listen to me!!"

"Ohh? Well sorry about that. Because it's not like there 's ANY way I could misinterpret that!"

I began to grind my knuckles on his head. I've often wrestled with Rock in the past, so it's not like Manami was that bothered by what was happening in front of her .

Rather, she thought it was quite amusing.

"… You two are getting along well as usual, huh?"

"… Agh, geez! You two…"

Dammit, I'm exhausted. Why the hell have I been so worried for the past few days? I even went for advice to my annoying sister…

But, well, I might be repeating myself again, but I'm seriously glad that nothing was wrong.

As soon as my strength waned a bit, Rock found a gap in my hold and ran away.

He's like a little rat, isn't it? Well, whatever.

"Haaah…"

Sighing deeply, I stuck a hand in the bag on my back. Taking something out, I held it out casually towards Manami.

"This is for you."

"Huh? Huuh?"

She received the gift properly, but she put on a rather strange expression and blinked rapidly.

"… This… is for me? T-thanks… but, why? Is it… my birthday today?"

"… Idiot… of course it's not your birthday. Aren't you 50 years too young to be going senile?"

As I watched my childhood friend act 50 years too old for her age, I felt an extreme sense of ease. In a pleasant but somewhat embarrassing way, I spoke.

"Your birthday is May 4th, isn't it? That's it, right? But don't worry, since you'll definitely get something on your birthday too. This isn't a birthday present… ah, dammit, whatever!"

I felt rather embarrassed talking like this, but because I couldn't think of anything else to say, my speech became jumbled up like that.

"Just take it!"

"A-alright…"

Hiding my embarrassment behind annoyance, I managed to get Manami, still blinking, to nod.

Maybe due to my bad temper, I continued to say unnecessary things.

"… It's not like there's any strange meaning behind this. Don't misunderstand what I'm doing here."

After I said that, Manami looked happy and replied with a "…yeah, alright."

… hm, why do I suddenly feel so fidgety?

Tch… because it seemed like it would be difficult for Manami to lug my present together with her luggage, I put on a stern expression and took up her trunk. She quickly thanked me, but I turned the other way and ignored her. When I stole a glance at Manami,

"… Hm, should I open it? Ehehe… I wonder what it is …"

I watched with bated breath as Manami began to gently, gently peel off the wrapping on the package.

At long last, the present lay bare on Manami's arm.

"Whoooaa…"

I had selected a rabbit hug pillow. The body was long, and it was made from a very comfortable material.

Honestly, I think it might have been an anime character or something, but whatever. I just liked the design. I really felt that this present would make Manami happy.

And it seemed like my prediction was completely correct.

"Such a cute pillow~~! Thanks, Kyouchan~~~!"

"… Haha, it looks strangely lazed and sleepy, doesn't it? Well, if you like it then I'm happy. Be sure to sleep with it once in a while!"

I stroked my chest in relief, and Manami happily hugged the rabbit pillow close.

"Mhm, I'll pretend it's Kyou-chan and take good care of it!"

"… Don't do that."

"Eh? Why? Its drowsy eyes remind me of Kyou-chan though…"

"Nevermind."

When you think of "thickheaded," you usually think of guys… but her head was definitely also quite thick.

That was super embarrassing!

So, in the end, the situation turned out to unfold like this…

There wasn't really anything serious happening here, it was simply me jumping to conclusions.

My relationship with Manami was the same as always, and hadn't changed in the least.

"Hey, when summer break starts… be sure to come over and hang out with me, alright?"

"Hm. If you'll help me with my homework, I'll come."

"Mhm. And, aand, because I made you worry… as an apology and as thanks, I'm going to make Kyou-chan some yummy food."

"… By 'Kyou-chan,' I hope you don't mean that bunny rabbit there…"

As always, with wrinkles creasing my brow, I began my retort as my childhood friend feigned innocence.

It was the same scenery as always.

The life I had always desired, that I would continue to desire, was certainly here with me right now.

… Geez. Our inseparable relationship was sturdier than I had thought.

I got the impression that I would be with this airheaded, plain-looking, bespectacled childhood friend for quite a long time.

As long as Manami and I both shared the same desire about our relationship, then that desire would be fulfilled .

Even if, someday, that desire would change.

But I was happy with what I had right now. I didn't have a single complaint.

I'll be depending on her after today as well.

Looking up, I gazed languidly at the evening sun [50], and a pleasant exhaustion filled my mind.

Character file.08
Iwao Tamura

田村い1わお【たむら・いわお】

◆麻奈実の弟。姉同様かなり天然系だが、オフ会に参加したり、洋楽にはまっていたりと、流行には敏感(?)

◆性別:男
◆年齢:14歳
◆身長:163cm
◆体重:52Kg
◆3サイズ:———

08

Chapter 3

第三章

Summer vacation. The break that all students waited for, the longest break of the school year.

Going to the beach, the pool, summer festivals, fireworks displays, roadtrips… it was a time filled with events that made my heart dance.

Yes, there were also short summer classes and summer homework, so there were still things about summer break that weren't perfect, but even then I don't think any high schoolers or junior high schoolers would go so far to say that they hated summer break.

Of course, that applied to me as well.

It was my beloved summer holiday. Viva the bright spring of youth! Come hither, wonderful free time!

I didn't have any particularly important plans for the break, but I did plan to sleep until noon everyday. Woohoo!!

I was in a great mood.

While working diligently to study for my exams, I planned to pass each day slowly and peacefully.

But…

"… Come on… they're not even open yet, so what's with this damn crowd…? Hey, come on, do something."

"… Don't look at me. It's not like I can do anything about it."

It was the Sunday right after Obon. [51] I was with my conceited little sister, and can you guess where I've been ever since the early morning?

"Ugh. Ughhhhhhh. Even though this is my precious summer break… if I knew it was going to be like this, I would have preferred just going shopping with my school friends a hundred times over this."

I'll give you a hint. I was being crowded by a large number of people, and I was in the city. Also, from our house, we rode a train for two hours, and at Shin-Kiba we switched to the Rinkai line. [52] And that's how we finally got here.

For those people who have gotten the hint, you can probably roughly guess where I am. Well, everything will be gradually revealed anyways.

"Ugh, I'm so bored. Why is it that I had to get up so early in the morning just to come to such a swelteringly hot place? Hey, are you listening?"

But… even though she had nagged and nagged and finally got me to go here with her, all she's been doing since we've gotten here is complain. Just shut up and go play your PSP, geez.

In the middle of this disgusting crowd, I sighed and looked up at the sky.

It was cloudy today. It wouldn't rain, but the midsummer sun was masked by heavy, thick clouds.

It was almost as if the weather reflected my own feelings, but thinking about how long I've had to wait here, maybe the clouds were a godsend instead.

If the sun were shining completely through, I wouldn't be surprised if I collapsed from heatstroke. Just the thick heat emanating from this crowd was enough to make me feel ill.

"Ugh…"

Wiping the sticky sweat from my forehead, I gave a glance to my side. As if she had lost interest in complaining to me, she was quietly fiddling with her PSP .

PSP…. PSP… I sort of wanted to play a bit with one too.

As someone who never got games bought for him as a child, seeing my little sister like this made me a bit jealous, but because my sister spent her own money to buy her PSP, I can't really say anything against her… dammit, maybe I should get a part-time job and buy one too…

Today, Kirino was wearing a pink camisole with a miniskirt, and had on a stylish pair of sunglasses. She was also wearing plenty of accessories, such as bracelets, earrings, and rings on her fingers.

She was cheeky and arrogant, but even so, I would be lying if I didn't say she was also really cute.

It's not like I'm saying that bitterly or anything. And it' s not like we're dating or anything.

No matter how much I say my little sister is beautiful, I'm honestly not trying to say anything in particular.

Kirino and I have been squatting in this line for over an hour… and this may be the first time in my life I've stood in line this long.

"…. Dammit, I can't do this."

I muttered to nobody in particular. But, no matter where I looked, my vision was filled with other people. People, people, people.

Ugh… geez… it seemed like such a long time ago since we got here, and I had mentioned wryly that these people were way too excited to be getting here three hours before the opening. When we had arrived, there had already been so many people crowded around… why the hell were there already so many people?! There must have been thousands of people here!!

I thought I already knew what otaku were capable of, but I obviously completely underestimated these people!

I probably don't have to tell you anymore, but right now, I was at a large-scale otaku summer event, having come with my sister (and her otaku friends) to the Tokyo Big Sight Convention Center.

A lot had happened before I got to this point…

Well, just listen.

If I recall correctly… it happened on the same night when I had made up with Manami.

Feeling refreshed after realizing that my troubles with Manami were a complete misunderstanding, I returned home, and went to return the laptop I had been always borrowing from my sister back to her.

It was because I was facing the end-of-term exams soon, and I knew I had to focus. And laptops… especially the Internet… would probably lead me to wasting way too much time and not studying.

So, because I was aware how bad it would be for me to have this computer, I thought it would be wise to get rid of it before the sun rose. At least, I wanted to get rid of it for this period when time was precious.

Hehe. I'm being pretty responsible, aren't I?

Furthermore, talking with my sister also helped me out a lot with the Manami situation.

So it was only reasonable that I would want to go and properly thank her for that.

Knock knock. I knocked on the door to my little sister's room. After waiting for a little while, the door opened a smidgen and Kirino peeked out, looking annoyed.

"… What?"

"Well…. I finished the game so… I thought I would give this back to you…"

For some reason, I had a strange feeling that something like this had happened last month too…

While instinctively feeling nervous, I responded.

"Umm… before that. I have something I wanted to say … uhh…. umm… thank you." [53]

I gave my thanks for her advice the other day.

"Because of you, I was able to make up with Manami. She also seemed to really like my present."

These were words I finally managed to spurt out through my blushing face after getting over my own terrible nervousness, but…

"…….. Hmph. I see."

With those curt words, Kirino shut the door with a bang.

W-what the hell?! I had tried so hard to give her my thanks sincerely, shouldn't she give me a bit longer of a response than that?! … And of all things, she chose to slam the door. I can't believe this.

My mood darkening, I began to harshly beat on the door.

"Hey, Kirino… didn't you hear me? I came to give you back these games."

The door opened once again, and my sister's annoyed face appeared.

"Tch… you're so annoying. So… what? Did you clear the campaign?"

"Hmph, yeah I guess. Here, I'm giving you back the laptop."

"Hmmm.. so that means that you can battle with me now."

Taking the notebook from me, Kirino's expression seemed to lighten.

I had no idea what she was thinking.

"Yeah, eventually, we'll play each other."

"Hmph. If you put it like that, I'll just play by myself…"

"I have to study for my tests, so I'll play with you after they're over."

"Studying for tests? What? You're still cramming this late for your tests?"

Shut up. You might say that I'm "still cramming," but the reality is that I haven't studied for them at all.

… Ugh. For some reason, it felt like someone was laughing at me, saying something like "Well isn't it nice that you've been playing eroge all this time even though you should have been studying for your exams!"

But no. That's not it. Seriously, there's just been a lot on my mind recently, so I haven't been in the mood to study… Manami also hasn't been offering to study with me… and so I haven't been playing anything other than eroge. Right? You understand how miserable my situation has been, right?

Ugh, even I knew that this way of thinking was pretty disgusting. It really wasn't a good excuse.

W-well… anyways! At the very least, I would start studying for my tests from today, so I would return the laptop and all the eroge back to my sister!

Kirino was also giving me just as much of a scornful look as she always did, but because I had progressed a

good deal in the game, she didn't have much to complain about on this matter. And so the day ended without incident.

… What does this story have to do with where I am now, you ask? Well, just be patient.

It wasn't until the next day that Kirino came at me. That day, I had finally gotten a chance to study with Manami, and feeling refreshed, I returned home humming happily. I opened the door to our house.

Suddenly, my sister appeared, looking ferocious.

She looked absolutely furious. Her face was bright red right up to her ears. But for some reason there were tears in her eyes.

"… K-Kirino? … W-what's wrong…?"

First, I was worried that her eroge habit had been accidentally exposed to our father. I mean, she seemed the same way last month right after she was scolded by our father.

With intense anger, Kirino began to stutter.

"D-d-don't ask me… w-what's wrong!! Y-y-you… y-you…."

Me? …Huh…? What did I do to make her so angry…?

I felt nervous and almost wanted to run away, and Kirino began to yell with an even more terrifying voice. While teardrops flew from her eyes,

"You used my laptop to look at ero sites, didn't you?!"

"Wha-"

For a second, my face went completely white, but…

"N-n-no I didn't! W-what the hell are you saying so suddenly?! Don't accuse me of weird things!"

Waving both my hands in front of me, I denied her accusation with all my might. But Kirino showed no signs of calming down. Rather, the minute I denied the charges, she got even more violently fired up.

"Don't lie to me!! I have proof!!"

"… Huh? What…?"

Don't call me an idiot just yet. I was sure I had erased all the sample images from the computer.

There wasn't any reason any evidence should be left, right? I had definitely cleared out the recycle bin on the computer. Even though I'm a complete beginner when it comes to PCs, I at least knew how to do that much.

I boldly held up my nose. But if I thought about it, if I had really gotten rid of all the evidence, there really wasn 't any reason Kirino would be this mad…

"Y-you didn't clear the cache…! Don't try to play dumb!"

"… What's a cache?"

Upon hearing a word I wasn't familiar with, my attitude suddenly weakened.

Kirino stared right at me, and began to explain while veins throbbed in her forehead.

"… In the browser… it's a place that records what sites you go to… what words you search for… that kind of information!!"

"… A-ahhh… that's the first time I've heard of that…"

What?! Dammit, was that really true…?

This must be how murderers feel like when they're cornered by the police with their high tech gadgets…

As I desperately tried to avoid my sister's gaze, Kirino's voice became ominously quiet.

"Eheh, ehehehe…. Ah, I was surprised. You know, I was trying to save some images of kitty nabe-pots, and I saw that there was still some image data in there… 'what could it be?' I wondered… so I took a look…"

… Crap, this is the end for me…

I could hear my sister's fury thundering in the background, and along with the most furious thunderclap, she yelled the following.

"What. The. Hell. Are you showing me?!?! Aaaaaaghhhhhhhh you're the worst!! I can't believe you! Hurry up and go die!!"

"D-don't cry! I'm sorry!"

"I'm not crying!"

Swish. Kirino wiped her tears away with the back of her hand.

She really seemed shocked by all of this… I don't think she was this distressed even back when she was being ignored during the offline meeting…

Ugh… even though she dresses so suggestively, maybe she's just weak with this kind of stuff…

What the hell. Isn't this weird at all? She plays so much eroge…

Was she angry because the images were of real people ? Or maybe, that she could only stand little sister ero stuff?

… no, this wasn't the time to be thinking about this stuff.

W-what should I do… well, it wasn't like I could do anything… I began sweating profusely.

"I-I won't look at it again… I apologize… alright?"

Regret and self-loathing churned in my chest. Ugh… why is it that of all things, I would be standing here being accused by my sister of looking at ero sites? I knew I was getting what I deserved, but…

Dammit… what has become of my life…? I really want to just die right here…

Taking ragged breaths, Kirino suddenly became expressionless and murmured absent-mindedly.

"From now on, I'm going to call you Ka Biankomu." [54]

"T-that's not funny! And also, don't you seem just a bit too familiar with all this stuff?!"

"I-I don't know that much about it!"

Flushing completely red, Kirino shouted and seemed completely serious. Her eyes never wavered from mine… like my father, she was a girl who would never go back on her word.

Without hesitating, I fell to my knees and begged for forgiveness.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

"Definitely not."

"W-what do I have to do… for you to forgive me…?"

"I already said I wouldn't forgive you, didn't I? I already said something like that before too."

That's certainly true. Having no other option, I decided to make a stand. Clicking my tongue loudly, I raised my head.

"I mean, I already apologized properly to you… so do whatever you want. Call me whatever you want. Honestly, I only took a quick look at that site… tch, but that nickname, keep in mind that you'll be embarrassed if you call me that anyways."

"Uh huh. But don't you know? When you double-click the search engine window, all the words you've searched for up until now are shown. So I know all the words you did a search for! So, what the hell is up with this ' childhood friend, mending relationship, what to say' stuff? No matter how many times you search, there's no way Google would give you anything useful for that, you know?!"

"… S-shut up!"

As I blushed, Kirino faced me with a blush of her own on her cheeks for some odd reason.

"A-also! That stuff about doing things 'while her g-glasses are on…'"

"Soooooooooooorry!!! It was my baaaaaaaaaaaad!!"

Changing my attitude on a dime, I threw myself before my sister.

N-not good! Those were definitely not words that junior high school girls should be saying!!

Uwaaaaaaah!! I really regretted this situation now!

It was definitely not a good idea to go off and do bad things with a machine I didn't really understand!!

Kirino calmly looked down at me as I was sprawled before her.

"… Hey, do you really like glasses that much?"

"Please don't tease me like that…! Seriously! I'll do anything…!"

But, you know? Don't tell anyone I told you this, but… you what do you think happens when you give a junior high or high school guy a computer, and let him search the Internet? Within a few hours, he would definitely be able to find what he's looking for! The ero world! Even if he doesn't try to search for it, while he's going around normal sites he'll naturally just be sucked in!

This was unavoidable! There was nothing that could be done about it! Even if nobody teaches him how to do it, if it's a guy, he would be able to find this stuff as if it were an inborn instinct!

You understand, don't you?!

There was no reason Kirino could hear these thoughts as they were being shouted in my head, but after I had told her I would do anything, she seemed to begin hatching a plan.

"… Anything? Really?"

"I-If it's something I can do…!"

"I see. Then…"

Kirino looked down at me while I was still prostrated before her, and made a proud declaration.

"You, take responsibility for making me unhappy."

"You want me to dance naked or something?"

"A-Are you an idiot?! Why the hell would I want to see something dirty like that?!"

"So, what do you want to do?"

"I mean… it's not that… this is about summer vacation ! I'll be really busy with club activities this summer… so I won't be able to have much fun."

In summary, it was like this. Because of Kirino's performance in some prefectural track-and-field meets, she was invited to participate in a track-and-field training camp.

You could say that I didn't know about any of this, or you could say I just didn't care. It really didn't matter to me how my prefecture's track-and-field team was doing, or how my sister was doing in the events… hm, although I guess it is pretty impressive.

But well, the upcoming summer vacation… especially from mid-August onwards, Kirino would be very busy. She would be up to her neck in training camp and practices, and wouldn't have time to have fun.

She even would have to take a break from modeling.

But before that, before she wouldn't have any free time anymore, she wanted to make some fond summer memories.

It's not like she said any of this to me directly, but this is what I guessed she wanted to say.

I'm not sure why she was telling me all of this, but if she told me to help her with this, then I really had no choice but to obey.

Even putting aside the whole nickname business with the Ka Biankomu, I'm her older brother, so I should help … pretty admirable of me, right?

But she really still hasn't told me what exactly she wants me to do.

"So… what do you want from me?"

"…. Like I said, take responsibility."

Kirino quickly turned the other way.

Hey, you know, I've realized something lately. My interactions with my sister would often end up like this.

It was extremely annoying, but when it came to this point, I would have to piece together what she wanted from me, make a guess, and then on top of that grant her wishes, or else she would get angry with me. But what made the situation more bothersome was that I wasn't in any position to tell her "How the hell should I know what I'm supposed to do, dumbass?!"

Ugh… looking up at Kirino from my position on the floor, I knit my eyebrows.

What in the world does she want to make me do? Even if she tells me to "take responsibility for making her unhappy," it's not that easy…

Does she mean I should try to make her happy or something?

Bravely, I decided to somehow guess what my sister wanted, and my brain began turning.

"The mountains….. or the beach….. or the movies…. do you want me to take you somewhere like that?"

"Huh? Why do I have to go on a date with you? That would be torture, it would embarrass me to death…. If you think about it just a bit more, you should know, right

? If I wanted to go to places like that, I would go with Ayase."

Well that was pretty harsh. Dammit, does she really think being with me is torture?

"Ayase?"

"Yes, the black-haired, stylish girl who came over recently. That's Ayase. We've been in the same class since last year, and we also often work together, so she's the one I talk to the most out of my friends at school."

When I mentioned her friend's name, Kirino began to sing her praises even though I had never asked. She had the same proud expression on her face as when she would talk about eroge…. so that's how it was…

"You said you worked with her… so she's a model too ?"

Now that I think about it, Ayase had said something like that before.

"Unlike me though, Ayase is attached to a modeling agency. I helped her out a lot when she was doing her first job, and from there we got pretty close. And now, well, we're close friends… fufu."

Ahh… until now, I really haven't seen Kirino talk about any of her friends so candidly.

I was certainly surprised, but at the same time it was quite a pleasant sight.

"I see. Close friends, huh?"

"Yeah. So you would never be able to take her place. It 's ridiculous to even compare you two. Understand?"

"Yeah yeah… so what exactly do you want me to do then?"

"Why don't you think a bit harder? After all there isn't exactly a long list of things you would be able to do for me."

Leaving off with that statement, Kirino slammed the door shut, leaving me alone in the hallway.

This asshole… she was never planning to actually tell me what she wants, was she?

But given how she was acting, there was probably something she wanted to do this summer.

However, she just didn't want to say it out loud… hm, I wonder what it could be…

For a little while, I stood in that place and thought about it… and then suddenly hit my palm with my fist.

I remembered that I had the phone number for someone that I could depend on in a situation like this.

Taking out my cell phone, I stared at the two phone numbers I had recently entered into my phone.

First, Kirino's classmate and close friend, the one we had just been talking about now, Aragaki Ayase.

Next, Kirino's otaku friend, Saori Bajeena.

Well, which one should I call? Both of them were good-natured people, so whichever one I chose to call, I'm sure that they would help me think about what Kirino wanted.

Hm… but, Kirino had already said it.

The list of things that I could do for her wasn't very long.

Well, that was true. It's not like I can really do anything important for her.

So then…

"Hahaha. If that's the case, I'm glad. I really wanted to invite Kiririn-shi and Kyousuke-shi to the Summer Comiket [55]."

"Summer Comiket? What's that?"

After a bit of thought, the one I chose to call was Kirino's Otaku friend, Saori.

Saori was the administrator for an otaku community, and might have some good idea as to how to get Kirino to make some good memories for the summer… at least, that's what I thought.

And I mean, when it came to what I could do for Kirino, this really was the only option, right? So, I don't think I was mistaken in giving Saori a call.

And then, Saori listened to my question cheerfully and with an "I'm glad," told me about Summer Comiket.

"Ah, Comiket is…"

According to Saori, Summer Comiket was a three-day international exhibition that happened in the middle of August. It was held in the Tokyo Big Sight convention center, and was a large-scale otaku event. It was a bit hard to imagine what it was like without actually seeing it though…

"I also wish that Kiririn-shi and Kyousuke-shi can create some fond memories this summer, so please come! "

If she puts it like that, there's no reason for me to say no.

Well, she really is a pretty dependable person, isn't she ?

Even though I was asking only about Kirino, she just naturally tacked my name onto the list of "people to give fond memories to."

Being able to meet Saori could have been a godsend, for me and for Kirino.

In any case, I was thankful. I smiled wryly.

"… Well, can I ask you to take us there, then? I'll tell Kirino about this. Thanks a lot for your help. Umm… can I ask you a few more questions? If we want to go to this event, can we go at any time during the three days? My dad's vacation pretty much is at the same time as the event. So when he comes home, we have to go visit a few graves, and so I don't think we'll be free on any day except Sunday…"

"Ahh, I see. If you can only go on the third day, that's perfectly fine. Well, I'll also go invite Kuroneko-shi now, so we'll settle on the particulars at a later day."

And so…

Right now, bringing Kirino along, I had come to the Summer Comiket.

It was still nine in the morning.

The weather was cloudy. The temperature was pretty low for summer, but because of the crowd, a sultry heat was lingering about.

The crowd of otaku milling about were all tidily standing in line, waiting for the doors to open at ten o' clock.

I mean, Saori had warned me that there was going to be a crowd, but I had no idea it was going to be this bad …

"Agh… dammit, why did I have to come here on a holiday? Hey come on, when is the line going to move? My legs are starting to get sore…"

While still staring at the screen of her PSP, Kirino flexed her elbows behind me.

"… I don't know. Seriously, all you've been doing for a while now is complaining."

"Hmph."

Kirino faced the other way and scowled. What a bad attitude.

Don't you think that's rude to Saori, who went through the trouble of inviting us?

But my choice to take Kirino to the Summer Comiket seems to not have been a bad one.

Because if Kirino really thought this was all so annoying and that she didn't want to come, then she definitely wouldn't be sitting here obediently like this.

If she didn't want to come, she wouldn't have accepted the invitation, and the minute she began to regret it, she could just go home.

So she was probably just spouting foul language to hide her embarrassment, and that was as much abuse as I was going to get from her.

… Hey. For some reason, it seems that I'm gradually beginning to be able to understand my uncooperative little sister.

Dammit, not good… this wasn't the time to be learning how to be my little sister's manservant.

As I impatiently thought of these things, I scratched my head and began to talk with Saori, who was sitting next to me.

"Ah…. Umm….. again, thank you. Honestly, you've been a great help… I wouldn't have been able to come up with any good ideas about how to get Kirino to 'make good memories' by myself."

"Fufufu… why are you being so shy, Kyousuke-shi? I'm the one who invited you two, right? It's natural that Kiririn-shi and Kuroneko-shi, and of course, Kyousuke-shi would want to try to have a lot of fun, isn't it? And I also have more fun this way. So really…"

In other words, she didn't need to be thanked. After saying all that, Saori smiled happily. As always, her mouth curved upwards in her characteristic shape…. this person is seriously… seriously… I really couldn't put it into words.

"Hey hey, why are you staring at me like that? Haha, I see, so you were just admiring my beautiful face, hm?"

"… Your face is pretty much all hidden behind those swirly glasses."

I'm really not admiring her… wait, also, beautiful face ? She really is pretty cocky, isn't she…

She was a huge person, standing at 180 cm tall.

She wore swirly glasses and her head was wrapped in a bandana. Her shirt was tucked into her trousers.

On top of that, she was carrying a boorish looking rucksack, from which a few rolled up posters peeked out. Her look screamed lack of sophistication.

Yes. Saori's appearance was possibly even stranger than her words and actions.

Saori would probably call this disgusting otaku fashion "appropriate for an otaku leader" or something. And honestly, she seemed to really hit it off with the other members of her fan community at the offline meeting, so maybe she's not wrong here.

As I sat in amazement at this huge aloof girl's attitude …

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!!!! What the hell are you doing?!?!"

I heard a shriek come from my little sister next to me.

It was already pretty hot and humid outside, but somehow her yelling out so loudly made it seem even hotter and even more humid.

Feeling annoyed and turning around, I saw Kirino glaring at her PSP screen with an angry expression.

"… Don't be so loud. What happened? Have you lost your mind or something?"

"No! S-s-s-she… s-s-she…"

Kirino was pointing at a Gothic Lolita girl dressed completely in black.

She was sitting opposite Kirino, and also was holding onto a PSP.

This Gothic Lolita's nickname was "Kuroneko," and was one of Kirino's otaku friends.

As Kirino pointed accusingly at Kuroneko, Kuroneko gave a curt, condescending response without any emotion in her voice.

"… Hmph. All I did was shoot a bit at your character for fun. A lot of people do that as a joke during cooperative play, you know? Don't get so angry about it. It's just Monster Hunter. Stop raising such a fuss about it. It's embarrassing if you yell like that."

"Huuh?! Every single time I kill an enemy and try to loot it, you shoot at me and stop me from getting the loot ! What kind of excuse is that?! I spent thirty minutes killing that monster, but in the end I couldn't get anything from it!!"

"… Well, I already have all the loot from that boss. So I have to look for other ways to have fun or I'll be bored to death."

"Wha-… this is fun?! Shooting at your allies is fun?!"

"… You heard me wrong… but in general, you should be thanking me for being so kind as to play with an idiot like you who lets her guard down to the likes of a Lao." [56]

"… B-but I died because of you, didn't I…?"

"How rude, blaming things on other people."

"Nooo!! Right after I set that huge bomb, you casually went over and set it off and the explosion killed me! And then every time I tried to heal, you got in the way! Attack the enemy, not me!!"

"Hmph, but that was quite thrilling."

"…?!?! I'm never playing games with you ever again!!"

……..

There was no point in me trying to butt in here. In the first place, I had no idea what they were talking about, and also, when these two got together it pretty much always got like this. I had already given up on trying to stop them.

I had no choice but to let them continue to go at each other.

Well well, it seems that when it came to games, Kuroneko had more skill than Kirino did.

"Fufufu… what a pleasant sight, don't you think, Kyousuke-shi?"

"It's… pleasant…?"

Hey hey, Saori-san. Are you being serious? These two both had pretty nasty mouths and personalities, so whenever they talked with each other they couldn't help but start spewing insults. How resistant can you be to this kind of abuse? Are you paralyzed or something?

See, look, the people standing next to us are starting to notice them, aren't they?

Well, I guess you could say that it's nice that they can be so frank with each other though…

Ugh, but also, I had to drag this girl with me here, and now I'll have to attend an event I know very little about … will I really be alright? I have a reaaaally bad feeling about this…

"Hey, Kyousuke-shi, where are you going?"

"… I have to use the bathroom. I've been thinking about a lot of things, and my stomach is starting to hurt …"

Lifting myself up off the floor, I answered Saori's question. Saori took out a wristwatch from her rucksack, and after checking it, her expression clouded over.

"… Hm, you should hurry then."

"Why? It's not like there's a bathroom that far away, is there?"

"It's not as bad as it is in the winter, but… if you're unlucky, you might have to wait half an hour for it. So if you don't go quickly, you might not get back before the line starts to move."

Wah… there was even a line for the bathroom… Summer Comiket was scary.

With a heavy heart, I looked upwards at the sky.

The line would start moving soon, in less than an hour [57]. It was so hot that I was breaking out in sweat just by sitting here. I could feel my energy draining. And the noisy pair next to me wasn't helping the heat.

"You cat bitch! Stop secretly setting depth charge needles in my blind spot!"

"Shut up, bitch. Did you forget that depth charge needles are effective against Ganototosu?"

As usual, the two girls were arguing with each other while playing the game.

"Hey, you two… hurry up and stop playing. The line's beginning to move."

I reluctantly spoke up. But Kirino and Kuroneko were determined not to listen to me.

"Don't you understand me when I say your last lightning attack dragged me into it too?! This is why your name shows up on the xlink kai message boards [58] !"

"… T-that's definitely just someone else with the same name."

"Hah, there's nobody else with such childish naming sense. Ah, seriously, I've been meaning to say this for a long time, but did you seriously think it was cool to put that messed up symbol before and after your name? Seriously, stop embarrassing yourself."

"What did you say…? … Yeah, that's what I thought, so what? Rather, I should be the one doubting your style for not realizing how great it is. Seriously, it's like all the other dimwit pigs who just jump on what's trendy… saying that putting † on both sides of a username is childish, that it's holy or that it's dirty, that only dumbasses would use such a beautiful symbol in their name… what the hell is that? Don't go and just label things like that so thoughtlessly. I'll decide what's cool or what's not cool by myself."

"Yes yes, I really sympathize with you. So please, put away the games and let's start moving, alright?"

Even though we still hadn't gotten into the building, my anxiety was already reaching its peak.

The line slowly moved forwards.

"Please move forwards as much as possible! You there! Move please, move!" came shouts of the staff all around us, but Kirino and them were still slow to respond.

The staff were already drenched in sweat, and their jobs did not seem easy.

I can very firmly say that I really dislike people who can't follow rules or directions.

Although it's not like I'm trying to claim that I'm that law-abiding and obedient.

More simply, I just don't like fighting with my surroundings. I want to live a calm and quiet life.

But even more fundamentally, it's not good to be causing such trouble for the people around you over such a trivial thing.

… Geez, I guess there's no helping it.

Bravely picking up my sister and Kuroneko's bags, I put myself between them while they were still arguing, and urged them both to go forwards by pushing on their backs.

"Hey, you two, come on, move. You're holding up the line."

"Don't touch me!"

Hey hey… so now they choose to harmonize… I guess they are good friends after all.

While my lips thinned in annoyance, Saori faced me and laughed.

"Hahaha. You're popular, aren't you?"

"Go get a new pair of glasses, you!"

The crowd slowly moved forwards. With a scowl, I began to walk through the large passageway that had developed.

Finally, the line of people went up the wide stairs, and we walked towards the giant inverted pyramid building – the Tokyo Big Sight convention center.

It was almost like a line of the dead walking towards Yomotsu Hirasaka [59].

By the way, I'm used to getting stares (from boys and girls) when I walk together with my pretty little sister, but right now there was nothing of that sort.

It's probably because everyone was excited for the event that was right about to start.

When we had ascended the stairs, Kuroneko whispered something (probably to Saori).

"… Today, can we start from the East side?"

"Yeah. First we'll do what we came for, to look at the doujinshi displays."

"When we were waiting, I read through a bit of the catalogue, but… what do you mean doujinshi displays? I mean, there's really one thing I don't understand. Doujinshi is, in short, books that people make by themselves right? Books that they don't sell at normal bookstores. So this is an event where people get together and sell these things… so it's just like a big version of that Tora-something [60] place we went before?"

As we walked, I asked my question and Saori nimbly gave me a response.

"You could say selling doujinshi is like that, but for me it's a completely different feeling… hmm, how should I put it… perhaps the important thing to keep in mind is that Summer Comiket is an event that was created out of everyone's efforts."

"…? … Aren't there companies behind this event?"

"Of course. In fact, there's a corporation that's responsible for the event. But they're more there just to set the stage so that everyone can have fun… to the end, this event is something that's brought to life by the staff you see, the participating doujinshi circles, and the many many general attendees who gather together."

"… Sorry. I still don't really get it."

"… You came here without even figuring this stuff out ?"

Kirino sent me a snide remark after hearing my remarks, and sighed in disbelief.

Hey, aren't you the host today? If that's true, shouldn't you be trying harder to make me feel more comfortable?

At least, I wanted to say that.

"Shut up, you. Hmph, well, you sure know everything about this, don't you?"

"How would I know? This is the first time I've come to this event too…"

This girl… she's so arrogant… and she still hasn't thanked me for carrying her things.

As sparks flew between Kirino and me as we stared at each other, Saori interjected.

"Come on, you two. Isn't this a good opportunity? You can participate and then find out for yourselves."

"Well…"

"I guess…"

Reluctantly, Kirino and I stopped glaring at each other [61].

After that, we continued walking until the stream of people began to branch off.

Hmm? I took out the catalogue from my hand luggage, and opened it to the page with a map on it.

I see… it seems that this was the entrance plaza, which was where you could get access to each of the buildings. Following after Saori and Kuroneko, Kirino and I turned left at the directional signs and entered into the building.

"Oog…."

"Uwah…"

Kirino and I gave out weary groans. The moment we took a step into the building, we were hit by a stifling wave of heat.

The entrance hall to the Tokyo Big Sight felt just like a fully crowded train.

There were so many people that it was difficult for me to see what was going on. All I could see was people people people, people people people.

Like this, it would be really easy to get swept away by the crowd and lost if we weren't too careful.

"Whoa… this is… hey Kirino, are you alright…?"

"Hoooot…! And smelly…! Ugh! Do they not have air conditioning?!"

With a terribly displeased expression, Kirino grabbed my shirt.

"Ugh, that fatty got sweat on me when he walked by!"

"Hey! Don't wipe it off on my shirt!"

Being able to see Saori's head poke out of the crowd, I tried to follow it without getting lost in the crowd. Ooog … it must have been ten times hotter in here than it was outside! It was hard to breathe! I need oxygen!

This is serious! Ugh….. this…. this is impossible! I don't even know how to describe this if you haven't been in this situation before [62]… this… this… ugh…

If I had to compare it to something… if I really had to … well…

Imagine you were on a fully crowded train in the summertime without working air conditioning, and you had to walk from the first car all the way back to the last car by foot… it's something like that…

Crap… I really wanted to go back now… I can't take this anymore. I seriously might start crying…

Ugh… to think that Summer Comiket would be as tough as this… if the weather were also sunny, I seriously might have collapsed! Banzai cloudy weather!

"Don't run! Please do not run!!"

Suddenly facing the direction I heard that voice, I saw an armband wearing staff member with an almost terrifying expression, issuing warnings out of his megaphone.

At his order, a group of otaku who looked almost like they were in a speed walking race slowed down.

But even then, I could feel their impatience at wanting to move forwards.

"… What's up with them… where are they rushing off to in such a hurry?"

"To the line of popular circles [63]. If they don't get there quickly, all the popular doujinshi will be be sold out."

Looking back, I saw that the one who had answered my question was Kuroneko. Hm… so it was like that…

Kirino seemed a bit affected by the hustle and bustle around her.

"S-shouldn't we hurry too?"

"Nah. Let's not rush too much today. I talked with Kuroneko-shi earlier too and that's what we agreed on. Certainly, standing in line waiting to buy doujinshi is one of the greatest pleasures of this event, but…"

Saori expertly navigated the crowded spaces and led us forwards.

Following after the dependable leader, we walked along the path to the Northern Concourse: Tokyo Hall.

"If you're going to turn your first event into a life or death struggle, I think that would pretty tough on you. Doing that also eats up a lot of time… and I wanted you to be able to experience more of what this event is about, so I thought we wouldn't stand in line today and would just stroll around and take a look at what's going on… nin."

Life or death struggle huh…? Well, certainly, it seemed fitting to compare this situation to a battlefield. Or maybe just to hell…

Earlier, while we were waiting, I had read the event catalogue in preparation for the event, and there were many fine details written on warnings and rules, as well as a page spared for information about the first aid room … so it's no wonder I would be wondering about how exaggeratedly crazy this event was.

But no warning could have prepared me for something like this.

Looking around at the crazy crowd of people around me, I nodded, finally beginning to grasp the situation.

But this Saori… she seriously had thought a lot about our feelings, hadn't she?

"… Hmph. Judging by what you're saying, you planned ahead and launched a funnel [64], didn't you…? If you did, make sure I get in on it too."

"Ahh, I'm really sorry. Unfortunately, I'm really just not planning to buy very much on the third day this time around… I wasted a lot of money at the Wonder Festival

too [65]… honestly, if I stuff any more figures or doujinshi into my room, people might start getting angry at me. Ahaha."

Saori shyly put one hand on the back of her head and looked down. I interjected in response to this exchange I didn't really understand.

"What's a funnel?"

"Umm, how should I explain it…? … Ooh! Kyousuke-shi! Look that way!"

When I looked in the direction Saori was pointing, I saw a middle-aged man wearing a flight jacket and with his long hair tied behind his head, zealously giving instructions into a headset.

-

"This is Skull Leader, this is Skull Leader, requesting status report, over. – - – - A28 new publication secure, acknowledged. A87 new publication secure, acknowledged. A69 battle ongoing, acknowledged. Message to Skull 2 and Skull 3, proceed with Plan B, continue to cover wall circles, and be on alert for warnings from the enemy search party. Skull 5, head

towards island center, and rendezvous with me. – - – - Do you copy, Pixie Platoon? Requesting status report on the corporate booth."

-

"….. Did the heat get to him or something? What the hell is wrong with that idiot?"

"No, no, nono! Kyousuke-shi! He's not talking to himself!"

Saori seemed alarmed, and quickly waved both her arms back and forth.

"He's managing his own funnel over there. He's communicating with his partners wirelessly, see? Umm … one way to put it is that it's an efficient way to obtain all the really popular doujinshi. And the names are based off of similar names used in Gundam to remotely control troops."

"A… ahh… so it's like that…"

As we were talking, we continued to walk, until finally a giant sign saying "East 4" appeared on our left.

Glancing intermittently at the map in my hand, I spoke .

"Is this where we're going?"

"Down a level. We need to go down on the escalators."

Kuroneko murmured her response. After that, in no time an escalator appeared before us. Two staff members were standing next to it.

"Please leave a step between you and the person in front of you when getting on the escalator!"

That and other such warnings were being yelled by the staff. As for us, Kuroneko and Kirino rode the escalator together, while I got on with Saori, and we slowly descended onto the lower flower.

While we were riding, we got a splendid bird's eye view of the scenery down on the bottom floor.

The expansive passageway below us was completely buried under the huge amounts of people.

"You know… there was a scene like this in Dead Rising [66]. When the zombies were rushing into the shopping mall."

Stop it, Kirino [67]. Don't say "zombies." If you say it like that, they're going to start looking like real zombies to me.

As I wearily took in my sister's statement, this time it was Kuroneko that started making outrageous statements.

"… Every time I come here, when I'm up here looking down at all these people crowding around, I wish I could kick them around with an AoE attack [68]."

"Hahaha, for me, this scene reminds me of Dynasty Warriors."

Even you, Saori? And all their analogies seemed to be related to games… I wasn't very knowledgeable about games, so for me this scenery reminded me more of the zombies from a George A Romero movie [69].

In any case…

At this point, I didn't exactly have the best of impressions of this Summer Comiket thing.

I mean, I never had any interest in coming to this event in the first place, I'm exhausted, it's damn hot, all my sister's been doing is complaining… there wasn't a single redeeming quality to be found.

Having arrived on the lower level, we entered into the hall from the entrance marked "East 4."

"I'm thiiirstyyy… it's hooooot… I feel groooss….. ugh, I'm feel like I'm going to die…"

For a while, Kirino had been hanging onto my shirt while we were walking, and had been ceaselessly complaining.

I felt the same way she did, so it's not like I could fault her for complaining.

Can she really make "good memories" this way? I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

"Oooo…"

Arriving at the sales floor, I twisted my neck to and fro , taking stock of my surroundings.

Of course, the terrible crowd was still here. The ceilings were incredibly high, and bare concrete was showing on the walls. It seemed like a factory or a warehouse, and its lack of decoration seemed unrefined.

There were tables in large quantity lined up in a row, and each one was selling some kind of doujinshi or other goods. And there were quite a number of these rows of assembled tables.

"You probably already know from reading the catalogue, but these shops are each called circles. You can use the same word to describe colleges and things like that [70], but in the case of doujin, the word is usually used to refer to much smaller groups. It refers to the author or authors, and those people who help them."

Saori offered me that simple explanation. Ah, I see now.

Last month, I had gone to a doujinshi shop, but Comiket felt different.

Comiket was… well, how do I put it… this is probably a bad way to say it, but… it was much more barbaric.

"Hm. It's like a huge, blown up version of a high school cultural festival."

"Hahaha. Because everyone who comes here is a child at heart."

… Was she trying to say something clever or something?

In any case, Kirino was gasping for breath as she followed behind me, continuing to hold onto my shirt. She began to pull on my shirt more strongly, and mumbled.

"I can't take it anymore. I'm at my limit. Break… Let's take a break soon. Somehow or other, quickly…"

She's annoying, isn't she? Even if she tells us to do that "somehow or other…"

Watching my sister who had already completely lost interest in buying doujinshi and was completely exhausted, I raised my eyebrows.

"Hey, well… for now, can we duck outside for a bit through that door [71] over there? I'm pretty tired too."

"Ah I see… let's do that then."

Going out through the door, a gentle breeze from the cloudy skies wrapped itself around us.

A long line snaked its way out from the hall, but the population density out here was not as high as it was inside.

Being able to take a small break like this definitely hit the spot.

"Ahhh… it's so much cooler outside."

"Ugh, I can't believe this. My head is spinning."

Kirino and I wiped the sweat off our faces, our energy drained.

"How pathetic, you two… the weather [72] wasn't like this at all yesterday or the day before yesterday, you know?"

Kuroneko, who had come to the event all three days, sent Kirino and me a scornful look.

Well, even if you put it like that, it's not like I can do anything about it. It was really sunny the day before yesterday, and it was raining yesterday… so today's weather was probably actually more agreeable. But even so, to beginners like us, this was definitely tough.

By the way… and this might be a stupid question…

This event… was it actually supposed to be fun? Frankly, wasn't it just tiring?

As I began to regret ever having come, Saori handed me a bottle of cold tea.

"Come on, everyone, if you don't keep hydrated you won't last very long [73]. For now, let's rehydrate, shall we?"

… Could it be that she actually froze plastic bottles to make these drinks…?

Ahh, I'm grateful. Downing around half of the tea I was given, I let out a single breath. Saori, almost seeming like she could read my mind, spoke.

"Well, you two… what do you think? Any thoughts on Summer Comiket?"

"It's really boring. It's hot, gross, and I want to go home."

Kirino spoke sulkily.

It was a pretty inappropriate thing to say to the person who had gone through so much trouble to invite her…

But unfortunately, I felt the same way. But, in spite of Kirino's abusive words, Saori did not seem hurt at all. Rather, she looked as if she was expecting a reaction like this.

"Fufufu… so it's like that, hm? Well, there's no helping that. Because at the start, you have to deal with all the troublesome parts of Comiket at once."

"Huh? What's with that attitude? It's like you were expecting me to react this way or something… annoying."

Seeming very irritated that Comiket turned out to be much more boring than she was expecting, Kirino once again began to tug on my shirt.

"Hey, you're the host, aren't you? So entertain me."

"I did say I would, but…"

Well, what exactly do you want me to do? Feeling lost, I put on a stiff smile and turned towards Saori.

"H-hey… Saori. Is there anything here that she might enjoy…?"

"Well…"

Saori slowly shook her head, and then turned the edges of her lips upwards.

"That depends on Kiririn-shi."

"… What do you mean?"

"Hm…. well…. how do I put it…"

Carefully choosing her words, Saori began to explain it to me.

"Well, in my opinion, Summer Comiket is a festival where the attendees have to be actively participating to enjoy themselves. So, for example, it's not like an amusement park, where they deliberately prepare things for the guests to enjoy. Taking this to the extreme, I could say that if you don't like manga or anime or games, even if you came here you would definitely not find a single thing that you would enjoy. In the same way, if you come to this event treating it like some leisurely excursion and think that you'll be able to find something entertaining here, then in the end you won't be able to have fun at all."

"… In other words, nobody forced you to come."

Kuroneko summed up the situation in a short sentence . So, if you're not already an otaku, or if you have a casual attitude about this event, you really shouldn't have come in the first place… that's what I got from their explanations.

But…

"Hah hah hah… but well, in this case, such worry is unnecessary! It'll be alright! For me, this place is a mountain of treasure! Leave it to me to navigate your way through this thing with a bang!"

And as she said, she hit her chest with a bang.

"… Well, Kirino's one thing, but I'm not an otaku."

"I'm not an otaku either."

Kirino was a shameless liar. Hearing her statement, Saori began to laugh uproariously.

"Hahaha. Well, if you can last the entire day without enjoying yourself a bit, then you two are certainly not otaku."

Ohoh, how interesting. I'll accept that challenge.

Spurred on by Saori's words, my mood improved a bit . (In retrospect, this might have been part of Saori's plan all along, but I'm not sure.)

Kirino also seemed to have decided on something, and suddenly stopped her complaints.

Continuing to pull on my shirt, Kirino spoke with an arrogant attitude.

"We've rested enough. Hey, stop talking so much and guide us."

"… Yeah. Thanks, we'll leave it to you."

Geez… As the princess's humble servant, I had to communicate the princess's intentions to her navigator.

"Leave it to me!"

Holding her chin with her hand, Saori laughed heartily . Right after, Kuroneko snorted with a "hmph."

And so…

Taking a single breath outside the convention center, we once again headed into the hall.

While skillfully finding her way through the crowd, Saori began to talk with Kirino.

"By the way, Kiririn-shi, did you take a look at the doujinshi I sent you?"

"Eh? Well… of course I read them all… why do you ask?"

"Well… did you like any of the authors in particular?"

The minute she was asked, Kirino let loose the joyful expression that had been waiting just below the surface … and then barely managed to push it back down, making her expression stiff again.

"W-well… none in particular… b-but, if I had to pick any… there's Yamanashi Ganma-san's Meru-chan book, and QQQ-san's Reika book… and then, oh right! That art collection… that one by Sakura G Sakura-san, the one that made Meruru into a manga! Ehehe! That one was reaaaally cute~~~!"

… She really gets pretty excited when she talks about stuff she likes, doesn't she?

What the hell is up with that "ehehe"? When you do that, it's really pretty sickening.

Geez, I seriously can't see how you're the same person as that one who up to now had been groaning nonstop about how super boring everything was.

As these pleasant thoughts made the edges of my lips turn upwards, Saori said something that got Kirino even more excited.

"To be honest, all the doujinshi I sent you that day were made by people I know."

"Huh?! R-really?!"

"Yes, really. I was going to go around to say hello to them right now… does Kiririn-shi want to come along?"

"I-I…. I-I-I…."

Kirino repeated that sound intermittently quite a few times, and then painfully spit out her next words.

"I-I guess I'll keep you company…! If you say so!"

Her breathing labored and her posture stiff, Kirino looked like she was going to go meet an Idol [74] or something.

"Oh no…! But! What should I do?! Ehhh~~~?! I'm so nervous…!"

"Ha ha ha, you seem to be pleased by this surprise I planned for you. Kuroneko-shi, Kyousuke-shi, how about you two? If you want, you are more than welcome to-"

"I'll pass."

Speaking in a tone of voice that ruined the happy mood instantly, Kuroneko turned her back towards us.

"Unfortunately, I have a sublime mission to go collect the decent looking Maschera doujin from the center island circles that do not consign their books to bookstores."

"I'm fine too. It would be strange for me to go meet with the authors of books I don't know… I'll just stroll around here and look around. You two just go by yourselves."

"Huh?! W-wait just a second, you, what irresponsible things are you saying?!"

"… Saori is going to be your guide, so it's not like you need me to follow you around, right?"

Why is she angry?

"Or rather, do you have a reason why you need me to follow you?"

"No, but…! That's not the issue…! Are you an idiot?!"

"Hey, hey," went Saori, trying to calm down Kirino, who had suddenly started looking quite menacing for some reason. With that, Kirino obediently quieted, but began to rapidly click her tongue in what appeared to be annoyance.

What the hell… why is she acting that way…? Is there really something that disagreeable about this situation…?

Sparks flew as Kirino and I stared at each other. Whether or not she was trying to diffuse this dangerous situation, Saori raised her voice.

"Well! For now, let's split up! Umm… when we're all done doing what we need to do, let's meet back here, wherever Kyousuke-shi is strolling around! If you can't find him, then at eleven thirty, let's meet in front of that bathroom over there."

That's a pretty ridiculous meeting place… well, certainly, the bathroom was very easy to find.

"So with that settled… let's go!"

Well, and that was that. For a little while after that, just like I had said before, I stayed around that area and casually strolled around while watching the buying and selling of doujinshi around me.

As I thought, the closest analogy I could make for Comiket was a culture festival. Occasionally, I would pass someone dressed in a strange costume and my eyes would widen, and then I might find a doujinshi from a manga I knew, and with a "ohh, so they have stuff like this too…" would casually pick it up and flip through it. Even long after the event ended, I remained surprised that such a majority of these books featured girls. Wiping the sweat off my face with a towel, I continued to walk around.

Hm. Occasionally I would find a really terrible book, but… I guess this was pretty fun.

As I browsed like that, one of the shop sellers called out to me.

"Hey, that cool oniisan over there!"

"Eh… me?"

Pointing at myself, I turned around. Ohoh! This was the first time anybody other than my childhood friend has called me cool! Getting complimented like that made me happy.

"Definitely, definitely take a look at our new publication!"

Smiling, she held out a book to me… it was a voice that I could have sworn I heard before.

You could definitely say that this girl in a maid outfit was cute (and she called me cool too!), so while I was being swept away by her, I opened the doujinshi she probably drew without even taking a look at the title or the front cover.

It was an ero book in which a maid was doing H things.

"…. Wha….."

Nervous sweat erupted on my face. I wonder if I've ever been so lost for reaction before in my seventeen years of life.

I mean, this book… the author of this book (who's also a maid too, right? She's wearing the same outfit as the character in the book. And what's more, she even looks like the character) is standing right next to me while I look at pictures of this maid with her breasts exposed and her legs spread.

"How is it?"

That's besides the point. Rather, I should be thinking about what I should do.

And also, she really looks like that maid at the maid café last month who brought me the "Little sister's handmade curry, zaraki flavor" or whatever.

Although, she looked slightly younger than that other maid, so it might just be an accidental resemblance…

If she really was the same person, you could call it an unexpected meeting, or rather, an unwanted second encounter.

"Do you not like it~?"

"No… it's not… well… the drawings are pretty good …"

"Thank you~. Ehehe… ah, I was pretty happy with how that position turned out~."

"…. A-ahh…."

… I felt sick.

Of all things, why did I have to be here having this conversation with this cute maid?

This is unbelievable… I feel so dirty…

Damn it all. Right now, in my head, I was trying with all my might to keep myself from saying that.

I wanted to quickly run away from that place, but the pervy maid girl in front of me was smiling at me with upturned eyes, and staring at me as if she was expecting something, so I was rooted to the spot.

… W-what? What do you want? Exactly what are you expecting from me?

… I know, I know. “Please buy this for 500 yen” is what you want to say, right? I know. I know all too well.

But, I mean… right now I was seeeeriously close to blowing a fuse.

Could it be that she wanted more of my impressions…? I couldn’t help but thinking that.

Ugh… I was in agony, and I creased my brow.

“?”

The shy maid leaned her neck to the side. Quit it with that cute expression, dammit.

Ah, crap… I can’t come up with anything else to tell her. Tch, well, I might as well ask the thing I’ve been meaning to ask.

Getting desperate, I steeled myself and summoned up the courage to make my comment.

“Umm… T-this maid in this manga, could it be that you were the model for her?”

“What the hell are you asking her?!”

Bang! A staggering interjection came from behind me. A kick landed squarely on my ass, and I toppled onto the ground. As I lay there painfully in that pathetic position, I looked up towards my attacker.

"Gwaaaaaaah…?! K-Kirino, you… when did you get here?! And why the hell did you kick your brother with those hard boots?! That really hurts!!"

"I-It was you who was sexually harassing that shopkeeper over there! I can't believe you! Even here, how could you be such a pervert?!"

You've got it all wrong! She's the one who first started sexually harassing me!! Right?! Don't you think so?!

Completely flustered, I turned back towards the maid.

"Stop sketching us!"

"Eh? A, ahaha… it's just… suddenly… I thought this would make a great drawing… ehehe."

Hugging her sketchbook to her chest, the maid looked quite embarrassed.

What the hell… so this is what doujinshi creators are like…? I sent a puzzled expression her way, and the doujinshi author happily clapper her hands together.

"Ah, yes! For my next publication… let's make an incest SM [75] themed book~!"

I vowed to myself that I would never come near this circle ever, ever again.

It was five minutes later. Having left the doujinshi marketplace area and feeling pretty peeved, I walked while carrying the maid's ero book under my arm. Soon after that event, we had met up with Kuroneko and Saori and once again were a group of four.

And… in the end, I was forced to buy a doujinshi…

But why the hell did my first doujinshi have to be a maid ero book? Or rather, I should be asking, why the hell were there so many ero books being sold in the doujinshi marketplace? I mean, of course there were non-ero things being sold as well, but clearly the ratio of ero books to non-ero books was pretty large.

Well, in the first place, if I had to say it… it's a fan event, so why exactly did they have to draw all their favorite characters naked? It didn't feel like they loved the characters… instead it felt rather dirty.

Was it because that kind of stuff sells? Was that really the reason?

Geez, ero stuff is everywhere, isn't it? And of course, in this world, guys who didn't think so and who weren't into this stuff didn't exist. This commonality was a shared system of values whose power exceeded that of even the Christian church.

Even now, even though I had been pushed to buy an ero book, I didn't really feel that bad about it!

As these thoughts were running through my head, I spoke up to Saori.

"Hey… having this book out in the open like this while walking… I don't think my heart can handle this for much longer…"

"Hm. Why don't we go over there and buy a paper bag?"

I see. That was a good idea. I turned in the direction Saori was pointing.

"Saori-san… can I ask you one thing?"

"Ah, what is it?"

As Saori leaned her head to one side, I calmly muttered my question.

"… Do you seriously expect me to walk around with a paper bag that has a huge picture of a half-naked girl printed on it?"

"I thought you meant that you didn't want the people around us to think that you were into maid moe."

A b s o l u t e l y n o t. How strange… why is it that I seem to fail at communicating with these people so often ?

"Don't they sell normal paper bags somewhere? Something I can bring with me on the train."

"On the train, hmm… well, how about that one over there?"

"Hoho, which one, which one… didn't I say I didn't want a perverted drawing?! Do you really think I have the guts to bring something with a pervy drawing on it with me on the train?! Seriously, I'll be arrested!"

Do you seriously think that Japan is by nature that liberal [76] of a country?

Abandoning all attempts at asking the girl with the swirly glasses who didn't seem to understand what I was saying, I saw big official Comiket paper bags being sold over in a corner (300 yen each), and I bought one. On this one too there were many summer-like color illustrations, but at least I could go on a train with this one without feeling self-conscious.

Returning to where the rest of my party was waiting, I walked in while Saori was talking with Kuroneko.

"By the way, Kuroneko-shi, you didn't participate in a circle this time around, did you?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be standing here right now, would I?"

It was an impatient, brusque tone of voice, as if she was trying to ask "Why are you asking me that now?"

Hm. From the flow of the conversation, it seems that Kuroneko was also involved in that kind of thing.

And then, misunderstanding some part of the conversation, Kirino interjected happily.

“Whaaat? You wanted to hang out with me that badly ?”

“Don’t say such disgusting things, please… hmph, it was simply because I applied but they didn’t accept my application.”

“Hmph. Well, why didn’t you just give your doujin to another circle to sell? Ah, I’m so sorry! I forgot that you don’t have any friends! How rude of me to ask that!”

Even though I was pretty dimwitted, even I could understand that Kirino said that on purpose.

Don’t clap your hands so happily like that. Are you a toy monkey or something?

“Oog…”

Kuroneko bit her lip while remaining expressionless. As if Kirino had hit the bulls-eye, she unhappily turned the other way.

"N-not really…? I don't exactly have that much money to spend either, so… if my own circle can't put out anything, then I didn't want to try entrusting a new publication to another circle."

"Huh. What kind of stupid excuse is that, you id–mpph!"

Clapping my hands over my sister's mouth which was just about to spit out more poison, I tried to change the subject.

"Hey, so as I thought, it costs a lot to publish a doujinshi, doesn't it?"

"… It depends on how you make it too. If all you're doing is copying a manuscript and stapling it together, which is what's called a 'copy-book,' then all you really have to pay for are the paper and the copies… that's fine if all you want to do is print something."

Kuroneko faced towards the circle booth right next to her, and pointed towards the doujinshi on the table.

"But if you want to make a genuine 'offset book' like that, in the end you'll end up spending a lot more."

"Offset?"

"It's a way of printing the books."

"Oh…? Around how much would it cost?"

Perhaps she was trying to tactfully prevent Kirino from interrupting our conversation, but with a casual " Kiririn-shi, Kiririn-shi, look at that Meruru book over there-," Saori led Kirino to a nearby booth. Kuroneko seemed to be choosing her words carefully, and slowly opened her mouth.

"Depending on the method of printing, the ratio of color pages to uncolored pages, and additional options, it can really vary… for me personally, it's relatively expensive, and for fifty copies I would have to spend around thirty thousand yen."

"… That… is definitely pretty expensive…"

For me, thirty thousand yen was an amount I could at least imagine [77], so my response was quite genuine. But if I calculated it, at a rate of five hundred yen per book, even if she sold everything, she would still lose five thousand yen, wouldn't she? Furthermore, if she really were to put out a real book, there would be various other expenses as well.

Of course, there were the travel and food expenses… she would also have to buy the tools she needed to draw the original copy.

But Kuroneko didn't seem to be as nonchalant about money as Kirino was.

"… Yes it is. So in many ways, it is very difficult to make doujinshi as a junior high student. In my case, I also spend quite a bit of money for other hobbies as well …"

"Yeah… and there's not much you can do about not having enough money…"

It's not like anyone could just go be a model and earn money like Kirino.

Having a part-time job was also forbidden by quite a few school rules, so junior high students really had it tough handling their finances.

"I help around the house… and I also secretly get part-time jobs. It's enough for me if I can put out one or two books every half year."

"… You'd go that far just for this? Just to put out this kind of 'offset book'?"

Looking at me with a stare that said "well, it's not like I expect you to understand," Kuroneko nodded deeply.

"Doujinshi authors each have their own motivations for making doujinshi. It could be for networking purposes, or simply because they want other people to see their work… or rather, it could be some mix of reasons like that. For me, I just really want to create a book by myself. So, I pick the higher price options and put out an offset book. Even if they don't sell well. So even though for me this is about self-satisfaction, there's no meaning to making anything if you don't approve of what you're doing, right?"

"Ahh."

I thought she was a pretty introverted, reticent person, but like Kirino, whenever she started talking about her own interests she became quite talkative. I had recently come to understand that the minute you flipped the right switch in otaku, they would start talking. I mean, everyone likes talking about their own hobbies after all.

It almost seemed like I was talking with my sister. I continued my questioning.

"So, do you get any feedback? After you make your books and sell them. Do people tell you what they think about them?"

"… Occasionally. After I distribute the books… at the following event, people who come to buy my books sometimes give me their opinions. Well… yeah, there's also the internet…"

"Internet?"

"Yeah. There are a few blogs that have posted their impressions about my books. I've also sometimes gone on search sites after events… and looked up how well-received my books are."

… How unexpected. She didn't seem like the type to care about what other people thought about her books.

I was surprised, and Kuroneko continued to talk expressionlessly.

"But, it's really awkward when I search for my book's titles on SNS and I find some article flaming it. Because, from that article, people track down and come to my site. Hmph, I wonder what they would think if they knew that author herself was reading their insults."

As if I would know! I didn't even say anything, so why was she turning the topic onto something so disagreeable ?!

Damnit… she's just as difficult to deal with as Kirino, but in a different way…

"B-but, I mean! When you see that people like your work, you're happy, right?"

"… I guess."

And then, Kuroneko, ever so slightly, ever so faintly, turned the corner of her lips upwards.

It wasn't exactly what I would call a smile… but I thought it was certainly an expression filled with no small amount of emotion.

"Being happy when something you make is praised… that's a motivation shared by all creators, I think…"

"I… see…"

I breathed deeply. I was speaking from the bottom of my heart, after all.

"… Wait… are you making fun of me? I'll curse you."

"No, I really think it's quite a meaningful thing."

Personally, I didn't have anything that I could put my heart and soul into like her. And I wouldn't be able to find anything like that.

So, I was envious of people like her who could find something to be so passionate about.

It really wasn't a bad thing… I had thought exactly the same thing last month.

"…….. Hmph."

As if thinking about how exactly to interpret my words, Kuroneko suddenly turned the other way.

"If you think that, then maybe I'll show you a few of my books later."

Sure. But if you could, show me a few that aren't ecchi please.

Perhaps as a result of Saori's guidance, Kirino bought a huge pile of doujinshi.

She seemed like she was in a good mood as she held her paper bag.

"… Hey. Don't you think you bought a bit too much? That's more than ten books you bought…"

And all of them were ero ones. We're probably way past this point already, but people under 18 really shouldn't be buying these things.

"Not really. I got a lot of them as we were going around and saying hello to people, and a lot of the people we met recommended books to me, so I couldn't just not buy them. And also, what business is it of yours

how many books I buy? Why do you even have to ask me that question?"

Hmph. That level of abusive language already had no more effect on me.

… At this rate, sooner or later I'll be just like Saori, completely numb to these attacks.

Hmph… well, whatever. Even though Kirino was spitting these hateful words towards me, it did seem that she had fun at the event.

Scrambling to and fro, she seemed just like a happy child at a festival. Heh… well, that's a relief, even though I initially had my doubts… it seemed like this would really become a fond summer memory for her. I really have to thank Saori for this.

And then…

After more or less covering the entire doujinshi sales floor, we temporarily exited the building, returning back to the entrance plaza, and then headed towards the Western hall.

While we walked beside the outdoor exhibition area, Saori, as usual, began to explain things to me.

"This year, the cosplay area was split into two parts, and one of those parts is the outdoor exhibition area over there."

"Hm?"

I watched with a forced smile as Kirino and Kuroneko both sped up, and gave a half-hearted response. I mean, cosplay was, in short, people dressing up in costumes, and having fun becoming anime or game characters, right?

Honestly, from what I could see looking at it from the side, it didn't seem like something I would be all too interested in.

Having finally arrived at the exhibition area, I looked forwards with cold eyes… but…

"Wha-?!"

"Hey, hey, what's wrong, Kyousuke-shi? I thought you didn't have any interest in cosplay."

Fu fu fu fu…. Saori sent me a big smile as I stood there speechless.

She probably assumed that I had gotten sight of some cosplay that had attracted my interest… but that wasn't it .

What I had found was much, much more outrageous.

"… T-that… that's…"

I was nervously pointing at a certain green warrior who was standing near the entrance of the plaza.

Wait wait wait wait… seriously? Seriously seriously? There was stuff like this too?

"Isn't that Cell [78]?! Cell is getting his picture taken!!"

"Yeah, that does appear to be Cell. Hmm… that's quite a good costume…"

"H-how can you be so calm about it? It's Cell!!"

"… You know it's a cosplay, right?"

"Idiot! Of course I know that!"

Crap… I'm getting way too excited about this! But it's Cell! Cell is right there, in the real world! And in his first form no less! The coolest, most terrifying form!

There are no guys in existence that could look at this and not be moved! [79] Whoaaaaaaa! Amaaaaaaaaaazing!!!

Filled with an excessive amount of happy surprise, I rushed over to Cell.

Imitating the others in the crowd, I set up my cell phone camera. Click. Click click.

"Umm… thanks a lot!"

Bowing my head multiple times towards Cell, I returned back to where Saori was standing.

"Hahaha! Look! He was doing the Kamehameha pose!"

"Umm… Kyousuke-shi? You realize that right now, you look exactly like a natural-born otaku, right…?"

"Ah! ……"

Showing off my cell phone photo to Saori, I finally came to my senses, and felt a wave of embarrassment wash over me.

…… Well……. how do I put it……. I guess it isn't impossible to understand how people feel when they get really entranced by cosplay. It actually was something even ordinary people could understand … it wasn't really that strange of a feeling… and Dragonball is a special case, so this doesn't make me an otaku. Understand?

While staring at my cell phone, I desperately made excuses for myself.

… Dammit… it just wasn't fair to throw Cell at me like that… [80]

"A-anyways, where did the other two go?"

When I forcibly changed the subject, Saori quickly pointed with her finger. Looking where she was pointing , I saw Kuroneko expertly handling a serious-looking camera, taking pictures.

The subject of her photos was a character donning a black mantle and a mask. Btshh! Btshh! Swish! Every few seconds the rather impressive cosplayer chose a different super cool pose.

"… Hm? Where exactly did my little sister run off to?"

I continued to look around. Beneath the cloudy skies, the outside exhibition area had been transformed into a strange place dominated by manga and video game characters. To my left and to my right, I saw many very strange costumed people (or should I say, inhuman existences) standing about.

There were also many people who, like Kuroneko, had prepared serious-looking cameras and were taking photos of the cosplayers who had donned their finest costumes. As I stared at this scene around me, soon I was able to catch sight of the restless Kirino who was wandering around the plaza.

Perhaps it was because of the trendy clothes she was wearing, but she looked like she could have been window shopping in Shibuya [81]. Of course, my little sister was looking at cosplayers, not clothing.

Kirino focused her gaze on the many many cosplayers standing around her, sincerely revealing her excitement with a “whoaaa” here and a “waaaah” there.

It was an appearance that was so starkly different from her usual hateful attitude. It was cute, and stirred my brotherly instincts to life [82]. As I watched her, I slowly broke out into a grin.

That’s great, Kirino. I mumbled my sincere feelings [83].

Saori half-ran to Kirino, and grabbed her shoulders.

“Kiririn-shi. How do you like it, seeing all this genuine cosplay?”

“Well, isn’t that obvi-“

Looking back with a full smile, Kirino forcibly stiffened her expression the minute she saw Saori’s smile.

“… W-well, it’s o-okay…”

“I’m glad, then. Seeing you have fun is my first priority.”

Shying away from Saori's knowing smile, Kirino's lips thinned [84] and she restlessly looked around. She really wanted to show how excited she was, but she was too embarrassed. That was the complicated mental state that was being revealed by her facial expression.

Honestly, my little sister wasn't a very open person. As I tried to hold in my laughter, Kirino blushed and glared in my direction.

"Hey, what the hell are you laughing at?!"

"I'm not laughing….. eheh."

As I stifled my laugh, I decided to casually change the subject.

As I gazed at the costumed people walking around me …

"Anyways, cosplay seems pretty rough, doesn't it…? Today it's cloudy, so it's probably not too bad, but wearing costumes like this in summertime must be tough ."

"… Hm, they're alright. They probably have cooling systems set up in their costumes."

At some point, Kuroneko had found her way back to us, and responded to my question in a shocked tone.

Now that I think about it, she was also a cosplayer too, right?

Indeed, that's probably why she's so knowledgeable about these things.

"People know when they can expect the weather to be really sunny, so people can at least prepare beforehand. This doesn't apply to just the cosplayers, but the photographers as well. Just look… everything moves so efficiently, right? It's so the cosplayers don't get worn down too quickly."

"Hm… I guess this is more complex than I thought. And judging by the way you haven't been sweating at all and seem pretty comfortable, you also prepared some heat countermeasures, didn't you?"

She had been wearing that really hot-looking gothic lolita costume all day.

"… Yes. There's an extremely thin layer of spiritual energy [85] surrounding me that protects my body from the sun's rays and heat."

"….. Um, what? Come again?"

"… You don't understand, right? Well, please give up. There's no point in asking. Unfortunately, those who do not possess the 'eye' peculiar to we who belong to the night cannot hope to 'see' this thin layer of energy."

Kuroneko gazed off into the distance. Seriously, I still had no idea what she was talking about.

"… Here she goes again with the same old jakigan [86] nonsense…"

As I stood in bewilderment at Kuroneko's statement, Kirino came over with her eyes thinned in annoyance and joined in on the conversation.

"We already know all too well how much you like Maschera. So can you please spare us and not mix in anime lines when you talk to people in real life? It's really pathetic and also pretty creepy in a lot of ways."

"Stop grumbling. The likes of a mere human like you …"

I see. I couldn't make head nor tails of what she was saying, so it would make sense to think that she was imitating an anime character. Satisfied with that explanation, I watched as Kirino looked up and down at the gothic lolita's flashy outfit.

"Now that I think about it, today's outfit is also of that character, right? Maschera's Queen of Nightmare?"

"… Where exactly are you looking? That's completely wrong. I'm not wearing a costume. These are my normal clothes."

T……. Those are her…….. normal clothes…? Sorry… I can't tell the difference at all.

Kirino lightly clicked her tongue.

"If those are your normal clothes, you should wear something cooler."

"That's up to me, isn't it?"

"I feel hot just by looking at you. Come on, just take off your outer wear."

The minute she said that, Kirino began to forcibly strip off Kuroneko's clothing.

"W-wait a second… y-you…"

Kuroneko struggled, but Kirino was surprisingly skilled, and in the blink of an eye Kuroneko was left in a no-sleeve cut and sewn shirt. She was also wearing a flared miniskirt, and long socks.

Her outfit was exceedingly prim and tidy.

I looked at the now lightly dressed Kuroneko, and let out a sigh of admiration.

Both at Kuroneko's very summer-like outfit, and Kirino's little performance.

Briskly putting Kuroneko's clothes into order, Kirino seemed just like a professional makeup artist working on the set of a film.

Perhaps this air came from the fact that during her modeling work, Kirino was always close to real makeup artists.

"Alright, much better."

Kirino seemed proud of her work, puffing out her chest. Holding the clothes she had stripped off in one hand, Kirino spoke with a strangely mature air.

"Everyone has their own tastes in clothing, but please pay attention at least to TPO [87]. You wear summer clothes during summer. If you don't do that, even your health will suffer. Understand? Hm?"

"…… But as I said, I'm fine with this heat…"

"Yeah yeah, I got it I got it. But just stay like that for a little while today. Alright?"

How self-important. Even though, technically, she's the younger one.

It's just that, Kirino's words and actions were… well, maybe it's better left unsaid.

She seriously isn't a very open person, is she?

"Wow. If you take off all the frills, you really look pretty cute."

"… Please don't give me the type of compliment where there's a hidden 'but I still look better' implied."

Kuroneko quickly turned her back towards us. Like that, she began to walk in the other direction.

I guess Kirino wasn't the only one who wasn't open with her feelings.

"What are you doing? There's nothing left to do here, is there? Hurry up and let's go."

"Idiot. Why do you look so embarrassed?"

Kirino made this statement grinningly while facing Kuroneko's back, and then thrust the clothes and paper bag she had in her hands towards me.

"Here. Hold this."

"H-hold it yourself…"

"Do you really want me to bring up that incident with four-eyes?"

"Don't be absurd."

Behaving like her efficient, obedient butler, I took the clothing and luggage from Kirino.

Slipping away from the outdoor exhibition area, we arrived back at the Eastern hall, and went into the building.

"The East 3 and East 4 halls are where the corporate booths are located. Corporate booths are… well, the simplest way to put it is that it is an exhibit space used primarily by gaming companies and publishers, and other companies that deal with subculture."

"Ahh."

I gave a standard response to Saori's explanation. But seriously, she's been acting just like a tour guide for some time now.

"There are also a lot of new announcements by companies made at this event… so there are also previews which debut here."

"Hmph." Looking bored, Kirino began to respond.

"New information, you say. Even if you don't come all the way over here to this event though, you have news sites like MOON PHASE [88] that will post these things. So shouldn't you just check for news online?"

Kuroneko snorted, seeming annoyed.

"Hmph, the things you read on the internet are so full of rumors and speculation. Of course, you can still have fun with the falsified information. But, I think there is definite meaning and value in showing up at an event to be able to see and listen to their announcements with your own eyes and ears."

"What the hell. What's with that tedious little speech? Are you trying to sound cool or something?"

"… Considering you're such an imbecile, you probably can't figure it out. These news site worshippers… they should all go drown in the sea of the Internet… Earlier too, you were talking about how you read an article on some site about some 'HG [89] training broom' or something and you bought it impulsively even though you had no way of using that. Are you an idiot?"

"I-I can put that in the entranceway, and my mom can use it to clean the garden! Besides, if someone tries to burglarize our house, and someone unsheathes a sword from the broom, he might get freaked out and run away! "

Kirno and Kuroneko again began to argue. Seriously, there was never a quiet moment with these two.

As the completely useless argument began to wind down, I asked Saori a question.

"Corporate exhibits, you said… what are they exactly? There's no reason that companies themselves should be making and selling doujinshi, right?"

"Of course not."

My sister interjected with a curt response, but…

"Actually, that kind of thing does happen."

Saori contradicted Kirino's statement. With an "Eh?" of bewilderment, Kirino turned around as our Comiket guide, Saori, began her explanation.

"For example, if you're a game company, you might make a fanbook or an illustration collection for your game, or distribute a novel based on your game. We could call these things 'official doujinshi.'"

"Oh? And what other types of things do they do at these booths?"

"They sell character goods, or stream new game PVs [90], or display a huge robot model… there are a lot of things they do. At publisher booths, sometimes you can even bring them your own work for them to take a look at… of course this time, there's also that strange 'Manga and Doujinshi of the World' exhibit."

"Submitting your own work, huh…? They even do things like that? Hmm…"

As I stood there wide-mouthed in surprise, Kirino nodded next to me.

Well, of course, considering this doujinshi sales convention was a place where people very knowledgeable about manga gathered, it makes sense that there would also be scouts here.

As these thoughts ran through my head, I heard Kuroneko absent-mindedly mumble.

"When such a colorless guy talks like that, it's almost as if I'm watching some Comiket informational video."

"Hey, that's a good way of putting it."

Kirino widened her eyes in admiration. Oh, shut up, damnit.

"I was just stating the truth. Stop it already with the boring question-and-answer session. You're here already, so just figure these things out as we go."

"Definitely. Can't you stop walking so slowly? I want to go to the Alice+ booth."

Hey you two, why is it that even though normally, all you do is argue with each other, whenever you start badmouthing me you fall into harmony with each other? And honestly, aren't I walking this slowly because I'm holding all your things? And why do you look so happy when you're bashing me like this?

… Dammit. Saori had also frequently said that these two are pretty compatible with each other…

Unexpectedly, that may really have been true. But if you ask me, all I can say is that this marked the birth of a terrible duo.

As all this was going on, we arrived at the corporate booths.

It was a completely different atmosphere than that of the doujinshi sales floor. The space was also quite enormous, but it didn't feel as unrefined or disorganized, and you could say it was even a bit prim and proper.

Here and there I saw a number of female cosplayers, flashing their graceful smiles.

When I saw that they were all beautiful women, I knew that they were probably professionals [91].

Something else that caught my eye were the paper bags that people were carrying with them, on which were printed large illustrations of pretty girls.

"Those paper bags are based on a popular work that was turned into an anime."

"Ah."

Perhaps noticing where I was looking, Saori gave me a well-timed explanation.

Afterwards, we found ourselves heading towards the Alice+ booth, which Kirino had been anxiously wanting to go to for a while.

Alice+ was the same company that made the eroge I had been playing recently, “Little Sister Wars – Siscalypse.” Naturally, at their booth they would be holding Siscali related events and selling Siscali related goods.

So of course, Kirino wanted to go to their booth. And because she had forced me to play the game to completion, I would be lying if I said I wasn’t the least bit interested in taking a look at the booth.

“Ah, look, it’s over there! Let’s go, hurry! I want to get the limited edition summer Comiket disk!”

Excited, Kirino began to move quickly towards the booth.

With a bitter smile, I shrugged my shoulders and turned towards Saori.

"Limited edition disk?"

"It's a data disk you can't get anywhere except at this event. If you install it, you get extra costumes, things you can dress your Siscali characters with. Well, it's not like it raises your character's defense stat or anything… you could call it a souvenir, or a collector's item… something like that."

"Hm. So that's why she's running over so quickly to buy it."

I was satisfied with her explanation, but for some reason Saori stuck out her lower lip and her expression clouded over.

"Yeah. But… probably…"

"Hm?"

I tried to ask for Saori to explain, but it turned out there wasn't a need to.

"What!? Sold out!?"

Because I could hear Kirino's loud exclamation after she had gone to buy the disk.

It wouldn't be a good idea to just leave my super short-tempered sister over there, so we quickly hurried over to the Alice+ booth. Kirino let out an astonished sigh.

"… It's a popular product that comes from a popular company, so it's not surprising that they're sold out by this time…"

"Wait a second… but it's only a bit after noon."

It sold out that quickly…? Wow.

Suddenly, I began to understand the feelings of the people rushing into the building at opening hours.

"Mhm. If you want to buy something like that, right after coming in you have to head straight for the booth and stand in line…"

Saori, who had planned out schedule to be much more leisurely than that, looked slightly depressed over this, so I told her "Don't worry about it."

She had already been such a great help, there was no reason to place blame on her for something like this.

With a gloomy air, Kirino had her shoulders dropped.

Facing her from behind, I slowly approached.

While she was probably glaring at the surrounding staff, I placed my palm on top of her head.

"That's too bad. Oh well, there's nothing we could have done about it."

"Shut up. Don't touch me. Everything's your fault."

She quickly brushed my hand away. Hey, why the hell is this my fault?!

… Even though you looked so happy up until a few seconds ago, you really can fall into a bad mood in an instant, can't you? Geez, there really isn't anything we could have done about this.

As I scratched my head, a staff member timidly spoke up.

"Umm… the limited edition disk… the portion for sale is gone, but you can still get one as a prize from one of our events… so if you would like, please try participating in one of those."

"E-Event?!"

When Kirino asked with an immense amount of expectation, the staff member shrunk back a little, but still began to explain.

"It's the debut of the arcade version of 'Little Sister Wars – Siscalypse,' which will be available to the public this fall. We will gift a copy of the limited edition disk to the first person who can perform the feat of defeating one of the staff at the game."

The staff member pointed to the side.

"To participate, please stand in line here! But be warned that the staff members participating are masters at the arcade version of the game. Winning will not be that easy!"

There was only one winner… the fact that they had only prepared one prize made it pretty clear that they weren't bluffing when they said it wouldn't be that easy to win.

But without even listening to Kirino's response, I already knew what she was going to say.

"Hmm, interesting. Let's give it a go then."

Yeah, that's what I thought… ah, she's so competitive.

Well, she can do what she wants. At any rate, it's not like she would listen to me if I tried to stop her.

Going around to the side of the Alice+ shop, we saw a small stage constructed for the purposes of the event. There was a set of arcade machines, and one computer unit that people could get experience with, along with a few large display screens that showed the gameplay.

Kirino and Saori stood in line, while Kuroneko and I stood off to the side with the spectators.

I tried sending a light question Kuroneko's way.

"You're not participating?"

"……"

Kuroneko completely ignored my words.

She stood there, stock still, while looking up at the screen expressionlessly.

… What an unsociable person. Being alone with her is so awkward…

Not being able to do anything else, I imitated my neighbor and looked up at the screen. Until Kirino's turn came up, I watched the other participants' battles with the staff members.

And… as I watched, I gradually came to understand the differences between the arcade and PC versions of the game.

In the arcade version of Siscali, unlike the PC version, you did not create a custom character and use her to fight . Like a normal fighting game, you had to select your character from a number of premade characters. And then, you can further choose your character's weapons, special moves, and costumes.

In short, they got rid of the training part of the game, and just simply left the fighting part.

I really wished they had added a mode like that in the PC version too…

But that's probably an unreasonable demand.

As I tried to listen closely to the noisy chatter around me, I heard the following conversation.

"Geez, in three days, that guy's won fifty straight times… the staff seriously isn't going easy on the players … the line of challengers is also thinning out."

"By the way, that staff member is a high ranking player for the PC version, isn't he? Going in blind against a player like that, who's using a new character… how can you win? And without even having gotten used to the new strategies…"

No, the character the staff was using… that wasn't a new character. It was one of the mid-bosses from the PC version, wasn't it? The costume was a bit different, but I definitely recognized that character's special moves.

"……..."

How the hell did it get to be that I could correct people who were talking about eroge?

Not good. This was seriously bad… and just because the arcade version wasn't 18+, that didn't make me feel any better.

The “normal high school student” I wanted to be shouldn’t be doing things like this… dammit…

I began to sweat profusely, and it wasn’t from any kind of excitement.

Kuroneko, in normal Kuroneko fashion, continued to stare at the screen without moving an inch.

The staff member continued to rack up consecutive victories…

And then, it was number 55’s turn. Kirino’s number had come up.

The character Kirino selected was a lightning user that had also been available in the PC version. The character was adept at both long-range and close-range attacks, and was very easy to use. It was a character that beginners often used, according to the wiki.

At the costume select screen, she chose the fairy outfit (it was an outfit that stressed speed, it seemed), and Kirino arrived at the battle style selection screen.

A large number of weapons and special abilities groupings were shown, and the players had to choose one at their discretion.

For example, in terms of special skills…

You can completely deplete your energy gauge and bombard the enemy with the “Super Railgun” attack.

You could also shake the joystick and charge your energy, and depending on the charge time you can perform close-range attacks that multiply your power like “God’s Rumbling Fist.” [92]

Having finished selecting her character, Kirino swung one arm around and her entire body seemed filled to the brim with fighting spirit.

It was pretty clear that she fully intended to win.

Even she should understand that her opponent was the formidable enemy (although the character looked like a childish brat) who had defeated 54 challengers in a row . Her attitude was seriously something else.

If you try, you should try to win. That was my little sister's stance.

When it came to competition, playing to win was an extremely fundamental element of mental preparation, but when you try to put this rule into action, you would find that there is nothing more difficult in the world. Pros and beginners were separated not only by skill level , but also by this level of determination, were they not? Lately, as I watched the way Kirino presented herself, these things came to mind.

"Ah?!"

She was beaten in a second.

Hey. Even though I had led you in with such a glowing introduction as if you were going to pull out a come-from-behind victory…

There wasn't even enough time to give commentary on the battle. The time it took for her to select her character was much longer than the actual battle.

"…….Tch. What the hell is with this bullshit game? It's not like you can expect me to win at this. That was screwed up."

Sulking, my sister's excuse seemed like something a delinquent who had just gotten beaten down at an arcade would say. Sadly hanging her head and walking slowly, my sister's form truly inspired sympathy.

"I mean… you're not that great at Siscali in the first place. There was no way you were going to beat someone like that."

"Saying things like that is what makes you so boring. That's something only a loser would say."

What's with that arrogant attitude, even though she had just lost?!

I understood what she was trying to say, but she was clearly just lashing out in anger.

And come on, the one who's making excuses is the loser, right?!

As I put up with my sister's abuse, Saori also lost and came back.

Bopping herself on the back of her head with one hand , she timidly looked downwards.

"Ahh, I'm really sorry. I made it pretty far, but…"

"Ah, don't worry about it. There's no helping it. You can't win against that."

If Saori couldn't win, and Saori was much much better at the game than Kirino was, then there really was no helping it.

There was nothing we could do but give up on getting Kirino the limited edition disk she wanted.

"Hey Kirino. Don't worry, cheer up. You can go buy any of the other goods that you like."

I tried to speak as kindly as possible. Kirino grumbled about being treated like a child, but it seemed she was satisfied with my statement.

"Hmph. I couldn't win, huh…? Haah… Hey, you, go buy that then. The life-size Siscali cutout over there, the one of sorceress Reika."

Kirino was pointing at a life-size cutout of sorceress Reika, a little sister that appeared as a mid-boss in the game but was a useable character in the arcade version of the game. She had blonde hair, was clothed in black, and looked like a magic-user, sprouting a devil's tail. Underneath her mantle, she was wearing nothing at all.

From her mantle, several tentacles sprouted to make an attack, so she was often called the "tentacle sister."

"… I don't think that's for sale."

And even if they were selling that, there was no mistaking that I would be the one holding it.

And with that pose with her mantle fluttering… can I really walk around with that? Does she want to kill me or something?

For argument's sake, if I had to carry that around, then it would be fine if we stayed in this area. After all, everyone around here is carrying ero goods.

But it would be impossible to do the same in my hometown. I would absolutely be against doing that.

If I met someone I knew in the middle of going home like that, what would I say?

For example, if I met Manami…

"… Siscali booth? What's that, Kyou-chan?"

The day she asked me something like that, I seriously might dive in front of a speeding train.

"By the way, Kyousuke-shi, where did Kuroneko-shi go off to?"

"Hm? She should be right next to… ah, she's not here."

At some point, she had gone off somewhere. She didn't have a large presence, so I didn't even notice.

Searching for any sign of the Gothic Lolita girl, we looked around.

Suddenly, I heard a cheer.

It appeared that someone had defeated the staff member who had racked up so many consecutive victories.

All the eyes in the area, mine included, turned towards the victor standing at the arcade machine.

Somehow, the person sitting there was precisely the person we were currently looking for.

"H-huh? W-what is she doing over there…?"

Kirino widened her mouth in bewilderment, and her voice was in complete disarray. With pretty much the same expression, I looked up at the display which was replaying the match.

On that screen, the previously mentioned new character "sorceress Reika" was shown being used by both players in a high speed battle.

It was a match between two of the same characters.

Sorceress Reika was more or less one-sidedly destroying the other Reika.

How should I put it… that is…

I had also cleared the game once, so I understood this all a bit, but that Reika who was one-sidedly beating up on the other one… her movements were just something else. With seemingly impossible reaction times, she completely countered each and every one of her opponent's attacks.

And then…

Whoooooooooooooaaaa!!! A cheer even louder than the one I heard before erupted.

As shown on the replay screen, the Reika Kuroneko was using had won in a perfect match against her opponent in less than thirty seconds.

Afterwards, the losing staff member, with great respect, began to applaud for Kuroneko.

"How cruel, Kuroneko-shi! I never knew you were so amazing at that game!"

Returning in silence, Kuroneko was hugged by a pleasantly surprised Saori.

"… Mrgh… W-wait… that hurts… please stop."

"What are you saying, you… you… haha!"

Kuroneko looked seriously annoyed, but for some reason, Saori might have interpreted her annoyance as embarrassment or something, and intensified the pressure of her hands.

This continued for a short while… finally, Saori released Kuroneko, and Kuroneko muttered, seeming completely exhausted.

"… Y-you're human, yet you don't seem to understand human speech at all… go get cursed, please …"

I could only wholeheartedly agree that oftentimes, Saori didn't seem to understand Japanese.

Saori didn't seem to mind that Kuroneko had just told her to go get cursed, and just continued to clap Kuroneko on the back excitedly.

"Ahaaah, but seriously, you're so amazing! What was with that unreasonably fast reaction speed?! It was like fighting a Level 8 Goenitz [93], Kuroneko-shi!"

Who the hell is Goenitz? Use comparisons I can understand, damnit.

Why is it that otaku always assume that other people understand all the references they're making? There aren't many people who would respond to these things as calmly and kindly as I would, you know.

Well, certainly, for people who know what she's talking about, it's probably a pretty easy analogy to understand.

"In any case, how exactly do you know how to use the special attacks of a new character? The normal skills are one thing, but there's no reason you should be able to so easily bring out the super special skills."

Kirino seemed flustered. It also sounded like there was some implicit accusation in her question…

She probably couldn't swallow the fact that Kuroneko, the girl she always argued with, had won against the opponent she couldn't win against. This was what people called "narrow-mindedness."

Well, anyways, I was honestly a bit curious to as to how Kuroneko knew how to use the special skills for the new characters (that is, characters that became useable just now).

Kuroneko responded expressionlessly.

"… When they were inputting their commands, the characters lean one way or the other, right? From how the characters lean, from how the player's hand is moving, from the sounds of the buttons being pushed and the timing, I can make out how to command the character."

Wait, what? Just by watching how the staff member was moving, she could see all of that?

Even how to use the character's special moves, in such a short time?

What kind of crazy power of observation was that…? Was she a freak of nature [94]?

"What kind of crazy power of observation is that…? Are you a freak of nature?"

"Crap! Why did I say that out loud?!"

All eyes were on me. Even though I had tried so very, very hard to keep my comment from slipping out through my lips, I couldn't keep my mouth shut. Dammit, why did I have to go and light a powder keg?!

Kuroneko was already the center of attention right now, so if an argument started it would be way too conspicuous.

A bit slow on the uptake, Kirino tried to smooth things over.

"… He means freak of nature as a compliment."

"That's not helping!"

Argh, it's too late. This is definitely going to get ugly… I covered my head with my hands, and wearily prepared myself… but after waiting for a while, the counterattack I was expecting form Kuroneko never came.

Puzzled, I raised my head, and saw Kuroneko staring fixedly at Kirino.

I have no idea what she was thinking. As usual, she had no expression whatsoever on her face.

"W-what…? D-do you have a problem or something?"

"……..."

Seemingly engulfed in the tense atmosphere, Kirino responded with an inflammatory remark, but quite expectedly Kuroneko didn't even budge. She continued to just stare at Kirino with her red eyes.

At long last… without lowering her gaze, she began to pace.

Next, she firmly grasped her own arm.

Light creases wrinkled her brow, and it seemed like she was very troubled by something.

Standing there, it seemed that Kirino couldn't stay silent anymore, and threw some more dangerous words Kuroneko's way.

"Hey… stop with the silence. Say something."

And then…

Facing Kirino, Kuroneko held something out to her.

It was the limited edition disk she had just received as a price.

"… I'll give this to you."

"Huh?"

My sister's face at this point was truly a sight to behold . Opening her eyes incredibly widely, her jaw dropped to the floor, and it seemed she was severely confused as to what had just happened.

"Eh? Ehh? What? … What do you mean?"

"… What? Do you not want it? Or do you just not understand human speech?"

Kuroneko spoke in a moody way, just like she would when she was arguing with Kirino.

Probably… probably, Kuroneko had won the limited edition disk for Kirino's sake.

Of course, I wasn't confident in that assertion at all, considering this girl was so socially awkward that I could not even begin to guess what she was thinking. Her speech and actions, her expression, and her attitude were all utterly disconnected.

She was absurdly difficult to understand.

And Kirino… why is it that when I was holding that box of yours, you were so quick to understand your own motives and try to snatch it away from me, but you're so slow here to respond to your friend's goodwill?

The problem in communication here was not completely the fault of either one of them; both of them were somewhat to blame.

"Um… if you want, would you like to have this?"

"Hm? Can I? Thank you."

Why couldn't they just do something as simple and straightforward as that?

In reality…

"… Hmph. If you don't need it just throw it away for me."

"I-I never said I didn't want it!"

"So, why don't you just stop messing around and take it? Heh… could it be that you're too arrogant to do even that? If that's the case, that's pretty pitiful. What a worthless person."

"What the hell is up with those irritating remarks…? Why the hell do you have to go that far?!"

Well, there you go… in the end, they started arguing again.

I couldn't stand to watch anymore, and averted my eyes.

And my line of sight settled onto Saori, who was holding her stomach and trying not to laugh.

Wiping tears from her eyes with a handkerchief, Saori turned and faced me.

"… fufu. Well well, well. I apologize, Kyousuke-shi. Ahh, how interesting. It might be a bit difficult to understand, but they're bonding in their own style right now."

"I know."

Kirino had wanted to make good summer memories.

That's what I had told them. First to Saori, and then… to Kuroneko as well.

And that's why I'm sure that this Gothic Lolita girl had , even though she knew she was acting out of character, done something for Kirino. I knew that.

"Tch! If you put it like that, I'll take it off your hands then. Be grateful!"

Kirino's words were filled with fury.

Mixed with a sigh, I translated for Saori while pointing at my sister.

"'Thanks! I'm reaaaally happy ♥!' is what she's saying."

"Buhahaha! You're definitely right! As expected from an older brother, you understand her all too well!"

"Hey! What the hell are you saying?!"

Faced with my sharp-eared little sister's remark, I shrugged my shoulders and played dumb.

Saori exploded in laughter, and for a long time her mirth rang through the room.

Chapter 4

After we had seen Summer Comiket from one end to the other, we headed towards Kokusaitenjijo Station [95].

Raindrops had already started pitter pattering down, so by the time we got to the station it might start seriously raining.

When we reach the other side, I wonder if we should hail a taxi…

Neither I nor Kirino had the courage to walk home carrying these two heavy, dangerous paper bags with us.

"Hey Kirino. By the way, I noticed you bought quite a lot from the corporate booths…"

"… What, you got a problem with that?"

Kirino's ears twitched. It was unavoidable that she would likely want to show off her purchases. Of course, I didn't really want to see her stuff at all, but it was at least better than getting into an argument, so I told her what she wanted to hear. "Um… I was just wondering what you bought."

"… Hmph, well I guess I can show you then." Kirino responded in an outrageously arrogant way, and with a "tadaa~~!" [96] showed off a piece of cloth wrapped in vinyl.

"Fufu, isn't it amazing?"

"… Umm… what is it exactly?"

"It's a Stardust Witch Meruru Summer Comiket limited edition hug pillow cover. On the front you have her in her Ecstasy Mode, and on the back there's Meru-chan in her underwear. Cute, isn't it?"

She was really happy. I had never seen my sister smiling in such an entranced way before.

I'm not sure, but if we're talking about Ecstasy Mode, isn't she also in that mode as well?

But, seriously… to think that I would hear the words "hug pillow cover" again here…

I had seen the word when I was shopping online, had dealt with the word when I gave Manami her present… it seems like lately, there's been a strange connection of fate between me and this word…

I had an idea that you would use such a thing while you were in bed… but if that's the case, exactly what would you do with it?

I mean, no matter how much you love Meruru, it's not like you would want to sleep with her, right…?

As cold sweat formed on my forehead, I timidly asked.

"Hug pillow… how exactly are you going to use that? To decorate your room or something?"

"Eh? It's a hug pillow, so obviously I would sleep while hugging it. Well, sometimes I'll rub my face into it and smell it as well…"

"……!!"

I shouldn't have asked! And she's looking at me, puzzled, as if that was the most natural answer in the world!

Don't make such an explosive announcement so casually!

I was gripped with an overwhelming sense of fear, and barely managed to get my next words out.

"… W-well… I mean… wouldn't it just smell like polyester?"

"Huh? It smells like a girl."

… That's your own smell! Or, to be exact, that's the smell of the brand of shampoo you use! ….. Uwaah… what the hell is up with this?! This… this little sister of mine!

She calls me a hentai over and over, but isn't she the one who's much more of a hentai?!

But I already knew that, you know? From the beginning, I already knew that!

Like that…

In the midst of tears and chaos, the curtain dropped on our first experience with Summer Comiket.

From the start, my goal in planning this trip and coming to the Big Sight convention center was to allow Kirino to make some fond summer memories, but personally, I didn't have fun at all.

It was just as Saori and Kuroneko said.

To the end, this event was a place where otaku gathered and actively had fun.

Average people like me were not welcome.

I had to wait hours upon hours before even getting in, the crowd was terrible, and it was absurdly humid.

My sister was constantly flowing with complaints, I was forced by that maid to buy an ero book, I had to carry a huge amount of luggage… it was terrible. Other than that Cell, there was nothing I was really pleased to see.

But well… even though the event didn't agree with me , Kirino seemed to have an increeeedible amount of fun.

She had been all complaints at the beginning… but she was able to meet with authors she liked, and was able to buy a lot of doujinshi.

She bought a lot, played games, saw cosplay. And because of that, was able to deepen the bonds between her and some of her friends.

That… should become… a good memory, right? I'm not her, though, so I can't say for sure.

"… Geez… my feet really hurt…"

Ahhh I'm beat. When I get home, I'm going to take a bath and then promptly fall asleep.

Yeah, and I'm never coming back to this event again.

But, I'll have to properly thank those two who helped in making fond memories for Kirino.

Slackening my walking speed, I casually left Kirino's side. Behind us, Kuroneko and Saori were talking with each other. I soon was walking beside them, and first spoke up to Saori.

"Ah, Saori. Thanks for today… you were an immense help. Seriously."

"Hahaha, no need to thank me. You did the same thing this morning, didn't you? … Fufu, honestly, you're

so polite, Kyousuke-shi. You're just a bit too conscientious, don't you think?"

"… no, I don't think so."

"Well, shall I pick different words and say you're a siscon instead?"

"… Please don't. You're just dodging the issue again. Can't you just simply accept my thanks?"

… It couldn't be that this huge thing was embarrassed every time I praised her or thanked her, right?

Kuroneko was hard to read since she never showed emotion, but Saori was always smiling, so it was difficult to figure out the subtleties of her mood as well.

Her speech and costume were all linked to this character she had created… so I had a feeling that what I saw in front of me was not the real Saori. Nevertheless, there was no doubt that she was a good person.

"Ah, I apologize. But, honestly, I'm the one who should be thanking you. I was able to have a lot of fun today. Letting me meddle in your lives and deriving pleasure from that… that gives me pleasure as well. Out

of all people, you should understand what I mean, Kyousuke-shi."

"… As if I would know."

Dammit, talking as if she could see right through me. She's really hard to deal with, this one.

Kuroneko suddenly approached me from Saori's side.

"… Could you please give me back my clothes?"

"Hm? … Oh."

I passed back the clothes I had been holding onto for a long time, and Kuroneko lightly put the clothes on.

"Oh, also… thank you too. From Kirino, also…"

"For what? I don't happen to recall doing anything for you that would require gratitude. Please stop. Being thanked for something I didn't do is the epitome of unpleasantness."

… In contrast, this one was easy to understand. She was of the same ilk as Kirino, after all.

As Kuroneko swiftly distanced herself from me, I nimbly tried to lead her into the next topic.

"Hey, come over to our house sometimes. After all, we don't live far from each other."

"… I'll think about it."

Just by that response, I somehow felt that I understood how she felt about Kirino.

It seemed that everything had gone splendidly.

There were plenty of bumps on the way, but I felt that Kirino's desire to make good summer memories had been successfully fulfilled.

But there was always the dread that things wouldn't continue to go as planned. Kirino and I remembered all too well the last time something like this had happened. A pitfall could suddenly appear out of nowhere in front of us.

I didn't think it was possible that such a thing could happen again.

We were on the way back from the Big Sight convention center. Descending down a wide set of stairs, we went through the main street towards the station.

The sky was getting more and more cloudy, and was filled with grey. It was an atmosphere quite unbefitting of such a trip's conclusion.

And then… just as we were about to reach the station, I heard a familiar voice.

"Kirino? Is that you?"

"?!"

In front of me, Kirino suddenly stiffened, and faced the direction the voice came from. I also moved my gaze that way.

Somehow, the person who was standing there was none other than Kirino's classmate and friend, Aragaki Ayase.

She was wearing a snug black tanktop, a short-sleeve white jacket, sunglasses, a silver accessory… etc. etc. I was familiar with her figure already, but her outfit

exposed her belly button, which startled me as I looked at her.

But perhaps it was just the atmosphere she exuded, but I didn't feel even a shred of indecency in her outfit.

She stood on the shoulder of the road, with her hands still holding onto the door handle of a station wagon with tinted back windows. It seemed like she had just gotten out of the car.

"Ahah, it really is you! Haha, ohh, what's up?"

"… A-Ayase… ?!"

Completely stiff and shocked, Kirino mumbled. Naturally, she was still holding in both hands the paper bags filled with doujinshi and other goods.

For Ayase, she was simply just surprised at this chance meeting. It seemed that being able to meet with a close friend in an unexpected place genuinely made her happy .

"Oh, I'm so happy! I can't believe it! Even though we didn't plan it, to be able to meet like this… that's amazing! It's like invisible strings bind us together or

something, don't you think? Ahh, haha, that made it sound like I'm you're stalker or something! Even though I'm not."

She really seemed excited about this. Under normal circumstances, Kirino probably would have joined her in the festivities, but of course these circumstances were far from normal.

"… Y-yeah… pretty amazing! … What a coincidence…!"

In front of her close friend who had suddenly appeared, Kirino's face seemed to cramp.

"This screwed up coincidence… this isn't good…! This has to be my imagination…! A dream… a mistake…!" is what she seemed like she wanted to say.

"Hey, what's wrong, Kirino? That's quite a strange expression! Come on, you're meeting here with a good friend, you should be happier! Ah, right right, why exactly are you here anyways? I heard that right after Obon [97], track would get so busy that you would have to stop working too. Maybe you're shopping… no that's not it. So, what are you doing then?"

It seemed that when Ayase got worked up about something, she tended to go on and on without letting anyone get a word in edgewise. My mother was the same way, and every time she did that I would get irritated, but for some reason when this girl did it she seemed cute instead. Something was different. Or maybe, everything was.

"…… U-Umm…… t-that is……."

Faced with her friend who was bubbling with joy, Kirino clearly seemed at a loss for words.

Now that I think about it, this situation felt similar to that offline meeting when Kirino was excluded from the group.

No matter how almighty she might be, Kirino seemed to be unexpectedly bad at dealing with situations like this…

But man… this really was nooooooot good…

Well, seriously though. If I were in her position, this would be like meeting Manami on the way back from Comiket in front of Kokusaitenjijo Station… haha.

Well, to be honest, though… right now, faced with this situation that my sister was freaking out about, even though I was completely shocked, I also found it slightly hilarious.

I mean, come on. Meeting a friend here with this timing… is pretty insane, right?

As I thought, her behavior was just too unacceptable in the past. Karma's a bitch [98], you could say.

Ahh… what are you doing to do, Kirino? How are you going to squeeze your way out of this predicament?

Eagerly to see how she would skillfully handle the situation, I watched intently, when…

"…! …!"

I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but Kirino looked towards me desperately for help.

"Do something!" she seemed to be saying.

… Me? Even if you ask me to do something… also, is this really a time to be turning to me for help?!

I mean, aren't you the one who believes that Ayase thinks I'm a monster of a brother who pushed down his little sister?! Argh, damnit!! Geez… I guess I have no choice…

Reluctantly, I faced Ayase and walked towards her, giving her a "yo" in greeting.

Of course, I was still holding onto those dangerous paper bags in both hands.

Having been completely focused on Kirino up until now, Ayase seemed to have finally noticed my presence. Her eyes widened and she blinked in surprise.

"Wah, if it isn't onii-san! It's certainly been a while! Hm?! Hmmm?! … Could it be, could it be… you two are on a date right now?!"

Why did she jump suddenly to that conclusion…? Could it be that she still hasn't been able to get over that accident that happened before?

I really wanted to scream "Hell no!" at the top of my lungs, but if I did that the conversation would just get more jumbled, so I steeled myself and went the safe route . "… Well… something like that."

"Wha?! What the hell are you saying?!"

Blushing, Kirino raised a protest (she probably was also surprised that I seemed to be strangely friendly with Ayase), but I quickly regained control the conversation and talked to Ayase in Kirino's place.

"You too. What are you doing around here?"

"Ah, I was doing some gravure [99] work."

Ah, that's why you're wearing such a revealing outfit. I'll definitely buy that magazine when it comes out.

"I was working right over there, but we had to suspend the shoot because of the rain… I was talking with my managers and taking a break in the car."

After saying that, Ayase looked up at the sky. It was as cloudy as ever, and the rain was pitter-pattering down.

I see, it was probably difficult to take photos outside in this weather.

"Ahh… I see…"

Well, it's good that I was able to steer the conversation somewhere else for a bit, but where do I go from here?

Ayase probably didn't know anything about otaku… so she shouldn't know anything about Comiket, or that there was an otaku festival going on at the Tokyo Big Sight Convention Center today.

So let's just wrap this up quickly and without incident, and go our separate ways. That would definitely suffice.

But, I mean… wouldn't it be alright just to tell this girl the truth?

Of course, it would still be best to just be able to get out of this situation skillfully without exposing Kirino's secret.

But I mean, they're close friends, so if she really did find out that Kirino was an otaku, would she really be that disgusted and go spreading rumors about it? She wouldn't, right?

At the very least, if I came out to Manami that I was an otaku, nothing would change about our relationship with each other… in fact, she wouldn't care what types of hobbies I had and would still continue to keep me

company like she's been doing up until now. And I couldn't ask for anything more.

But, I couldn't say that my relationship with Manami was the same as Kirino's relationship with Ayase.

But, the only person Kirino, with all her attitude, could sincerely and proudly identify as a close friend was Ayase. And I've also met with her before, if only just for a bit, and I've been able to talk to her and get a decent reading of her disposition. She was absurdly softhearted, a bit quick to jump to conclusions, kind, and sincere…

So I mean… no matter how she manages to trip up, in the end they'll just end up laughing about this, right?

But most of all, just like I had almost wanted to cry when I imagined what it would be like to be exposed like this to Manami, for Kirino, this was a life or death situation.

Well, let's see if we can't lie our way out of this safely.

"Umm, Aragaki…"

"You can call me Ayase."

"Ah, well, Ayase… sorry, but we're a bit busy right now…"

Looking very apologetic, when I signaled our intention to leave…

Perhaps Ayase had misunderstood something, but with a worried expression she closely examined Kirino's face.

"… Hey, Kirino, are you not feeling well? You haven't really talked at all this entire conversation… you don't look good…"

Well, that's just because you've sort of driven her into a corner and she's about to blow her fuse. She's really relatively bad at dealing with adversity, this one.

"Y-Yeah, that's right… I'm not feeling that well… so… sorry, we have to go."

What a liar… a child could lie better than she could…

Kirino spoke in that weird tone of voice she used with her school friends and put on a forced smile, but that excuse seemed to backfire with Ayase.

"If you want… you can ride in the car with me. Should I take those heavy looking bags for you?"

"T-thanks…! E-hehe! But really, I'm fine!"

Kirino wildly refused Ayase's offer. Each time she fervently waved both hands back and forth, the dangerous paper bags waved in the air.

… H-Hey, Kirino… those bags look really filled to the brim…

If the bottoms of the bag rip and everything falls out, no matter how you spin it this situation is going to turn serious, you know…?

Completely ignoring my concerns, Kirino continued to deny Ayase's persistent invitations.

At last, the good-natured Ayase seemed to admit defeat.

"I see, alright, Kirino… I shouldn't interfere with your date with onii-san."

"Y-Yeah…"

Kirino nodded, an amazingly complicated expression showing on her face. "Ugh… I guess I have no choice but to say that now…" she seemed to be screaming while she tried to justify her words. Was it really that bad? Although, it's not like I wanted her to say something like that…

"By the way, Kirino… there's been something on my mind since I saw you…"

"W-What is it now?!"

Kirino seemed to be halfway to tears as she yelled. Ayase stretched her neck, and tried to peak behind Kirino.

"… Crap."

The same word issued forth from both my mouth and Kirino's mouth as we turned around.

Because right there stood the two people who had been left in the dark up until now, Saori and Kuroneko.

Wah, I had completely forgotten about those two…! I'm sure Kirino felt the same way.

Ayase seemed to be somewhat drawn to those two otaku behind us, and she raised her eyebrows.

"Umm… those two… are they your acquaintances…?"

"Eh, a-ahh…. ummm…?!"

Kirino seemed even more at a loss. I understood how she felt all too well. I mean, take Saori who was dressed in that gross otaku fashion, or the Gothic Lolita Kuroneko. The more you looked at them, the stranger and more suspicious they seemed.

And when I inevitably compared them to Ayase, they really stood out way too much.

"U-Umm, umm, ummm….."

As Kirino looked over her shoulder at her otaku friends, cold sweat flowed down her face.

"Crap! I'm going to get exposed because of those two!"

That's probably what she was thinking. Her distress was completely visible on her face.

Saori seemed to be unusually stiff, a forced smile on her face. Being as perceptive as she was, she probably was thinking carefully about whether or not she should introduce herself as Kirino's friend.

And Kuroneko was the only one here that maintained no expression on her face. With eyes that betrayed none of her thoughts, she watched as the events unfolded before her…. and before long…

"… You must be mistaken… shall we go? If we don't hurry back, we won't make it in time to catch the anime at 5:30. And I do want to see today's episode."

Quickly turning around and heading towards the station in a route that went far around us, Kuroneko walked away. Next, standing between us and Kuroneko and looking back and forth a number of times, Saori in the end also followed after Kuroneko.

"……"

Lately, one thing I've come to understand about Kuroneko is that what she does on the surface is almost completely independent of her actual inner motivations. So here, it may well have been that she wanted to go

watch the anime, or it may have done that for our sake… I'm not sure which was the case. But…

Sorry about that… thank you. I muttered these words under my breath, inaudibly.

Kirino also looked uncomfortable, and silently watched as the two of them left.

With Saori and Kuroneko having somewhat unexpectedly withdrawn from that place, only Kirino, Ayase, and I were left.

"… W-What was up with that…? … Those two… those were some really strange outfits… weren't they?"

Ayase mumbled a bit timidly while making sure that the two otaku had left the area. Well, I guess for her, the outfits those two were wearing would be quite a shock… but honestly, despite their appearances, they were both honestly good people, you know…? I tried very hard to prevent myself from saying this out loud.

"B-But, yeah! I definitely don't know gross people like that!"

Hey Kirino… in the unlikely case that you're actually saying that sincerely, I would definitely smack you. I don't think that's the case though.

"A-Ahh…"

Ayase looked around her, looking uncomfortable. Of course, all around us there were otaku who were headed towards the station on their way back from Comiket. There were also ones who were holding the same paper bags as we were, so I was really nervous… I really hope she doesn't notice…

"Hey Kirino… for a while now I've been seeing a lot of strangely dressed people… and buses with anime art drawn on them… is there something going on around here today?"

"I-I don't know! M-Maybe it's because Comiket is today?"

What the hell?! I-Is she an idiot?! No matter how flustered you are, isn't it clear that to someone like Ayase with no knowledge of otaku culture, those words don't make any sense?! If you say something like that…

"Comiket… what's that?"

See, now look what you've done! What are you going to do now?!

"C-Comiket… it's that event that's going on over there , right? I really don't know though… they sell d-doujinshi, and stuff."

"… Doujinshi… what's that?"

"Eeehhh….." [100]

Arrrrghhhhh!! This isn't good at all!! You're digging your own grave here, Kirino…

Even though those two had so thoughtfully left the area for us… what exactly are you trying to doing here?

I looked up at the sky in disbelief. Giving out so many hints like that would give Ayase plenty of reasons to get suspicious. Ayase put on a mildly distrusting gaze, and began to pry further.

"… Kirino? Umm… are you hiding something?"

"N-No, I'm really not…?"

Kirino denied her accusation with a terribly weird tone of voice. But Ayase's gaze had already turned to the paper bags that Kirino was carrying, and seemed to be reading the words that were printed… on them…

Next… Ayase began to alternate her gaze between the flustered Kirino and the paper bags.

Well, this is it, isn't it? The countdown to Kirino's otaku exposure has begun… having realized the situation, I then…

"I-I mean, we really are very busy! Sorry, we'll see you later!"

Forcibly pulling Kirino by the hand, I tried to get away from that place. The situation had already gotten this bad , so I couldn't think of any other way to resolve it other than getting away from here and just persist in playing dumb from here on out.

"L-Let's go, Kirino."

"Eh, ahh, yeah… see you, Ayase…"

Even though she was still completely bewildered, Kirino obediently took my hand and allowed herself to be dragged away. I really hate to say it, but if you looked at us at just that second, we really may have looked like a good couple. But..

"Wait!!"

Ayase's thunderous voice boomed out behind me.

I was completely prepared to run away, but I was forced to a stop.

The atmosphere became incredibly charged. To think such a thing could come out of a docile-looking creature like this…

When I turned around, I saw that Ayase had grasped Kirino's wrist tightly, as if trying to tell her that she wouldn't be allowed to run away.

"A-Ayase…?"

"Kirino, why are you running away?"

"Umm… uhh… I'm not running a-"

"Liar."

And that's that. Ayase crushed Kirino's denial in an instant.

"You're lying… lying lying lying lying lying… don't lie to me… you were running away, weren't you? … You were running away, right? Running away? … Why are you lying to me?" [101]

… Huh? W-what was up with this strange forcefulness all of a sudden…?

Still gripping Kirin's wrist tightly, Ayase continued to accuse Kirino of lying to her and trying to run away.

In the face of this eerily threatening atmosphere, Kirino and I were both completely taken aback. And since the words were directly intended for her, Kirino seemed especially shocked.

With my hands still holding onto Kirino's, I began to speak very timidly.

"… A-Ayase…? Umm…"

"Shut up!"

Huh?! H-Hey, wait wait wait… who exactly was this person?

"Onii-san, please stay quiet, won't you? I'm speaking with Kirino right now."

"I'm… sorry…"

What the hell was up with this scaaaaaaaaaary woman ?!?! That was an intense glare!!

Clearly, she was not the same person she was a few minutes ago!! Multiple personality disorder?! Spiritual possession?! If you just took her words out of context,

you could feel that she was a bit angry… but it was way more than that. Seriously.

What a ferocious intensity. The rain that had started falling mixed in with Ayase's long black hair… a terrifying atmosphere drifted about in front of the Kokusaitenjijo Station. It was almost like a scene out of a horror movie.

Please believe me… I'm not exaggerating at all…!

My father was also pretty terrifying, but fear on a whole different plane of existence now attacked me and my sister.

What the hell was up with this sudden chant…? Did we really do something to anger this girl?

"I'm sorry for shouting so suddenly… but, I'm… just worried about you, Kirino."

Changing her tone, Ayase went with something more gentle and apologetic this time. It was a tone of voice that made me feel like feathers were tickling me in my ears.

"So Kirino… please don't run away. Won't you answer my questions? You're hiding something, right?"

She went right back to being scary there at the end! The gap between that tone and her gentle whisper is so startling!

This is why good-looking people are so… T-T-This is why…!!

Give me a break! Why is it that this always happened, that there wasn't a single pretty person I knew with an upfront and honest personality?

Was there a wire loose somewhere [102]?! What the hell was up with my luck with women?! Arggh, dammit, as I thought, normal girls are the best! Somehow, I suddenly felt an intense desire to see my childhood friend!

And also, Kirino! Y-You, did you know that she was… that she was like this?

Having drifted off from reality for a second, I returned to my senses and turned my gaze to my sister, goosebumps rising all over my body. And then…

"U-Uhhh….."

Kirino seemed much more scared out of her wits than I was.

U-Uwaah… she didn't know this side of Ayase existed either, did she…

"… N-No, that's not it. Ayase… that's not it. So uhh… please don't get angry?"

"You too, Kirino, please stop making excuses, won't you? I'm being serious, alright?"

"Uhh…"

"Right now, you were running away, right? You were trying to run away from me, right? Please don't give me excuses… if this really is a misunderstanding though, just tell me, alright? If you can, that is."

"U-Uhh…"

Groaning, Kirino looked down at the floor. I mean, if I had something said at me with such intensity, I would probably do the same.

Honestly, she really was just making excuses… there's no way she can refute that.

Staring at her friend with an empty expression like that, Ayase snarled and bore her teeth.

"See, you can't say anything! Don't you know? You know, don't you Kirino? I absolutely hate being lied to. I absolutely hate people who lie to me! But even then, why would you do something like that? Why would you lie to me? Come on, tell me. I thought we were close friends?"

Oogh… scaaary… and what's more, how she's getting angry is leaving a bad taste in my mouth. What's up with her unpleasant accusations?

See, look, the otaku around us are getting scared as well and are starting to glance over here…

And I mean, in the first place… why did this girl suddenly get so hysterical?

I mean, sure, it wasn't right for us to try to trick her and run away… but no matter how you looked at it, this was an overreaction, wasn't it? She really doesn't have to get so charged up about this. Don't you think?

"……"

Kirino did not offer a single response, and continued looking downwards. I couldn't see her face from where I was standing, but I could feel her hands tightly holding onto mine. Her palm was hot, her hands were wet with sweat, and she was trembling.

As Kirino stood like that, Ayase closely examined her. Her eyes were narrowed, and she spoke coldly.

"Come on, say something for yourself."

"……"

"… Not being able to say something means that you have something to be guilty about, yes? Or maybe, there's something you don't want to talk to me about? … How shocking, considering I thought we were close friends. I must have been mistaken."

"N-no, that's…"

"No? Did I say something wrong? What did I say that was wrong? … And you aren't talking again. Cut it out."

Ayase brought her face close to Kirino's face. All while she still had a firm lock on Kirino's wrist.

And then, suddenly, she did a complete about face and put on a painful expression. Her pretty eyes became wet with tears, and she raised an appeal.

"This isn't you at all, Kirino… what in the world has gotten into you? Hey, did I say something wrong? Was I mistaken? Am I wrong to want to know why you were running away from me, why you were trying to lie to me ?"

Not being able to bear watching this scene anymore, I pulled Kirino's hand and interposed myself between the two girls.

"… Let's leave it at that. Even close friends can keep one or two secrets from each other, can't they? Come on, let go of her hand. If you grab it that hard, it'll bruise."

At my words, Ayase seemed a bit ashamed. A bit later, she put on a smile and let go of Kirino's hand.

"… I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?" She sincerely apologized in a sympathetic manner.

"Yeah… I-I'm fine…"

Saying that, Kirino put on a weak smile, but as I feared , there was a red hand mark left on her wrist… exactly how hard was she holding onto Kirino's wrist, that girl… ?

With rather gloomy thoughts, I gazed at the swollen red mark.

"I guess that's true… even close friends can have one or two secrets, right?"

Ayase was by no means speaking in a joking tone of voice, but her expression and words were both very serious.

"… But, I want to help support you [103]. I mean… you 've been such a help to me… it's always been like that. With the modeling job, as my senpai, as my classmate… for many years, you've always supported me in everything I do."

To me, you're a very, very important friend.

I could not feel any semblance of artificiality or ulterior motive in her words.

She was speaking from the bottom of the heart, and she truly was fond of Kirino. That's why she wanted to help Kirino in any way possible.

Even if Kirino refused her help, she couldn't just stand by and watch, pretending everything was alright.

It was a line of reasoning I feel like I've heard before. It was a line of reasoning I understood all too well.

I could almost see her next words coming.

"Just by how you've been acting, I can tell that you're hiding something from me, that there's something you don't want to tell me. But, this time, for some reason, I felt like I just couldn't let it go. You could call it a woman 's intuition… although that might be a bit too grand. I just had a bad feeling about this… so I couldn't leave it alone."

"Ooo…"

Kirino awkwardly looked down at the floor while Ayase gave her a worried expression. Her hand trembled nervously.

Ayase followed Kirino's line of sight.

"Is there something in those paper bags?"

Giving the paper bags a piercing, ferocious glare, Ayase spoke in what was probably the scariest tone she had used up until now.

Of course, we couldn't respond to that question at all. Both Kirino and I could do nothing but stay silent.

This time, without urging us on or insulting us… Ayase soon appeared by our side and stared into our eyes. It was incredibly unnerving.

"… Comic Market [104]… hm?"

Ayase read the event name printed on the paper bags in an annoyed tone of voice.

A period of silence once again elapsed… Plop, plop… only the sound of the rain around us slowly increasing in intensity could be heard in my ears. And then, finally…

The rain began to come down in torrents. It was an unadulterated downpour.

Kirino suddenly became worried that the paper bags would get wet. She promptly tried to move somewhere with a roof hanging overhead… but once again her wrists were caught.

"Where are you going?! Is that really more important than this conversation right now?!"

"…"

Kirino must really feel driven into a corner at this point. I should probably act now and there would be plenty of ways to deal with the consequences later, so I had already begun to move to help, but…

"Let go!"

Kirino forcibly tried to shake off her friend's hand. I really don't think she meant to make it look that way, but

there was no way to view the situation other than that Kirino was rejecting Ayase.

There was no mistaking that Ayase felt that way. Her face flushed red hot.

"Kirino…?!"

Not wanting to lose her grip, Ayase's hand that was being shaken grabbed onto the paper bag…

Riiiip! By the time the hollow sound reverberated in my ears, it was already too late.

"Ah-"

As Kirino looked back, she made a soft exclamation. In the midst of the present tussle, the paper bag's bottom had torn. The doujinshi that Kirino had bought all spilled nakedly onto the ground. Watching them getting cruelly soaked in the rain, even someone like me, who had very little emotional attachment to them, felt heart-stopping shivers go down my spine.

Even though she was so happy to have bought them earlier… that's… pretty terrible…

Kirino seemed to have fallen into a state of complete and utter shock, and stood stock still while going ghastly pale.

Ayase looked down at the doujinshi which had dropped at her feet with cold, frightening eyes…

"!"

Slowly, she picked up one of the Siscali doujinshi. Her facial expression didn't change, but her eyes widened.

Flip flip, flip flip… She turned through the wet pages, speaking with a tremble in her voice.

"Don't… worry. I won't tell anyone about this. To think someone like you would be into these… kinds of things… that you would go so far to lie about it, to try to hide it… I don't think anybody would believe that kind of ridiculous story even if I told them… but."

Right then, the trembling in her voice ceased. She spoke in an unfeeling tone of voice, sending a chill down my spine.

"… I'm sorry. I cannot be friends with someone like that… Kousaka-san. Please don't try to talk to me at school from now on either."

It was three hours later. The minute I arrived home, I plopped down the paper bags in the entranceway.

"……. Ahh…… I'm so beat……."

Falling into an exhausted squat, I was too tired to even move.

High level otaku would do this three days in a row, but it would be a terrible mistake to think they were in the same class of people…

Well then. This isn't the time to be doing this. These dangerous things have to first be quickly put away. If mother found these, it really wouldn't be pleasant…

… But, my sister who should have taken the initiative and put those things away had shakily walked up the stairs right after coming home.

It wasn't an atmosphere in which I felt comfortable talking with her. On the way back, in the train and the

taxi, it had been like this. Shouldn't I be deserving of a bit of praise just for having tolerated this gloomy, unpleasant atmosphere for longer than two hours?

Geez… what to do about this situation…?

Taking off my shoes, I rubbed my heel which was throbbing in pain. I then once again took up the five damn heavy paper bags, and slowly went up the stairs. Once I arrived at my sister's room, I put the paper bags down for the moment, and began to knock… but there was no response.

"Hey Kirino. At the very least, let me put the things you bought in your room."

She didn't respond, but I heard a bit of noise coming from within. Without anything to lose, I tried twisting the knob, and found that the door wasn't locked. She probably didn't even have the energy to lock the door. Opening the door slightly, I saw that the room interior was completely dark. Doing a rather brotherly thing, I threw the door open, turned on the lights, and tried to cheer my depressed sister up… at least, that idea ran through my head before I rejected it. However I thought about it, it just was completely out of character for me,

and I felt no sense of duty to go that far. In the first place, I wouldn't even know what to say to her, and considering how much she hated me, anything I did say had no chance of cheering her up in the first place. It was a pitiful situation, for both me and my sister.

"… I'll just leave these here then."

Through the crack that had opened up, I slid the five paper bags through as gently as possible. This was something I could do, the bare minimal brotherly action. "I'm going to heat up the bath, so come in after a bit." As I thought, she didn't respond.

After washing off my light sweat in the shower, I decided to prepare the bath. Soaking in the tub put the body at ease much more than a shower alone. And if nobody else came in, then I would just go in myself. I wouldn't let it go to waste.

… How long has it been since I've done something like this for my little sister?

I thought about it. Well, up until now, we've been pretty much ignoring each other, so…

After I finished my shower, I checked my cell phone, and saw that I had missed a call from Saori.

As I thought, when I returned her call, she seemed concerned about what had happened after they had left.

“Honestly, thank you for today. Thankfully, we made do, so don’t worry about it. Sorry that you had to worry about us.”

I didn’t mention that the girl that was there was Kirino ’s close friend, that her otaku hobby had been exposed, that their relationship had been broken off, that she was now depressed… Saori had done a lot for us today, and had planned out our day for us, and had accompanied us the entire time.

I definitely didn’t want to give her some strange reason to worry about us further.

”I also tried to call Kiririn-shi, but she didn’t answer, so…”

“Haha, she’s also tired, I suppose. Right when she got back she fell asleep.

Ah, so it was like that? I'm relieved. Honestly relieved.

Saori seemed to have regained her peace of mind. Even though she had done so much for us… I'm really sorry.

It wasn't until the next morning that I saw Kirino once again. Both my parents and I were gathered around the dining table.

My sister, last to appear, seemed to be acting as if nothing had happened. If this were a manga, the depressed heroine would have come out looking terrible with shadows under her eyes.

But both her hair and her makeup were as tidily put into order as always.

It was normal for Kirino not to talk while she ate, and she silently ate her curry. Giving her a sidelong glance, I felt that this all was a bit anticlimactic. What's up with her?

"Kirino, training camp begins today, right? Aren't you nervous?"

"Who exactly do you think I am, mom?"

It was a statement brimming with confidence and said in complete seriousness. My little sister was someone who could say things like that naturally, and moreover continue to produce results to match.

At this time, I couldn't help thinking about how it only took her a single day after breaking off relations with her close friend to get back on her feet. I was impressed. You could go so far as to say that I was moved.

After we had gone to make summer memories for her, Kirino, as she had mentioned before, would become incredibly busy until summer ended.

Even after she returned from her one week training camp, she would go to practice day after day, and after she came back she would shut herself up in her room. These kinds of days continued until the month's end.

After Summer Comiket had ended, my sister and I had not exchanged a single word.

She didn't come to me for life advice again, and I didn't try to talk to her about what had happened with Ayase. And even though I had promised to battle her in the game, up until now that still hadn't happened.

In other words, I had no idea what the situation between Kirino and Ayase had become after that incident .

There was a lot of questions I wanted to ask Kirino. But I didn't.

I also didn't try to call or email Ayase about the matter .

Why, you ask? Because it's not like I was friendly enough with them to meddle that much.

In relation to that incident, I had not moved a muscle. And I didn't intend to in the future.

Of course… my sister had come to me multiple times for life advice, and I as well had gone to her for help with Manami. Compared to the perpetual cold war we had waged with each other before, I think we had definitely made a bit of progress in our relationship. And within the limits of those life advice sessions, we found many chances to talk to each other.

However, to the very end, those were instances where we just wanted advice.

Don't misunderstand. You might think that we were getting along more lately, but Kirino and I still both hated each other. We were just oil and water, so there was no helping it. So it's for the best if we can just come to terms with this situation and continue to ignore each other as much as possible.

Right now, we had regressed to the situation of a few months before, returning to the cold relationship in which we avoided eye contact and didn't try to talk with each other.

And so this was the end result of that last life advice session…

She probably had already given up on trying to get life advice out of her useless brother.

… Well, I don't mind. I don't take issue with that at all.

I mean, having been mixed up with this life advice business by my annoying little sister, you could say I was grateful for how things turned out. Nothing more would disturb the peaceful life I wanted to live. It was refreshing.

Hmph… I just don't give a damn.

Before I knew it, summer vacation was over, and the second school semester had begun.

Lately, perhaps because of all the unpleasant rain and thunder we've been getting, my sense of seasons had gone to hell.

The temperature would go up and down and up and down, so I had to be careful in choosing my daily attire.

By the way, the reason I can worry about such trivial things is because I had returned back to the ordinary, unblemished life I loved. Today, just like any other day, I was with Manami walking home from school.

"Hey, hey, Kyou-chan… it's been a while since we've done this, hasn't it?"

"Hm? Since we've done what?"

I sent a puzzled look to my childhood friend beside me , who had suddenly broken into a grin.

Manami's eyes arched in the middle of her plain looking glasses, and her expression slackened.

"I mean, walking home alone together like this."

"What are you talking about? The new semester started today, so isn't it pretty obvious we'd be doing that?"

And it's not like it's been that long since we've walked home together like this.

After all, what about all those times during summer break when we had gone to the library or the park together?

After I naturally responded appropriately to her comment, Manami thinned her lips and looked up bitterly.

"That's not what I meant. Oohh, you don't understand at all, do you, Kyou-chan?"

"If you ask me, you're the one who doesn't understand … geez."

If I still have so much trouble understanding Manami even though we've been friends for a long time, there's probably no way I can understand other women…

Walking along like that for a bit, Manami spoke in a very natural tone of voice.

"Hey. Kyou-chan, there seems to have been something on your mind lately."

"… What do you mean?"

I turned the other way and feigned innocence. Manami chuckled.

"'I don't quite know what's bothering you… but I can tell that whatever it is, you don't want to talk to me about it. But, I can't let that go. No matter how much you say it doesn't have anything to do with me and refuse my help, I can't just stand by and pretend nothing is happening.' How about I say that?"

"…… Oh hoh…… where did you learn how to say cool things like that?"

"Cool, right? It's what Kyou-chan said to me a while ago." [105]

"I-Is that right?"

Ehh… I could just play dumb here, but if I do that, I have a feeling that this situation is going to get to be more and more of a headache.

"What the hell… you're going to be the death of me."

"Same to you."

As I gave up with a painful expression on my face, Manami cheerfully laughed while nudging me with her bag.

It almost seemed like we had returned to midsummer. And it wasn't as if the scent of sundried grass coming from my childhood friend had anything to do with that feeling.

"But, seriously… there's nothing bothering me… honestly."

"… Is that right? I'm pretty sure there is, though…"

Well, if you say so, maybe there is. But, honestly, nothing comes to mind.

"Hmm… maybe it's something… you're not conscious of?"

"Hm."

"Ah, I remember you said something about your little sister… does this have something to do with that life advice you gave Kirino-chan?"

"Definitely not."

I responded instantly, announcing that conclusion in a forceful tone of voice. When I did that, Manami clapped her hands together.

"Ah, I got it. So it's that."

"No, it isn't!"

What the hell just happened?! But Manami seemed to be convinced in her beliefs, mumbling things like "ahaha, you really aren't very honest with yourself" with a know-it-all air.

"… At any rate, even if there is something bothering me, it has nothing to do with my sister. Alright?"

"Yeah, sure. Well, can I ask you something else then? Has there been something bothering Kirino-chan lately?"

"……."

What the hell… I don't like this. I don't like this at all … it seems like she's been leading me around by the nose all this time… she said that she was asking me something else, right?

Even though she seems so plain, she's pretty impertinent, this one…

When I refused to talk further, I realized that we had arrived the usual T junction on the way home.

And then, with perfect timing (or should I say, terrible timing), we saw my beleaguered little sister. It wasn't like this was an unusual occurrence, considering all the schools in the area pretty much let their students out at similar times. This type of chance encounter had already happened dozens of times.

"Ah… that's… Kirino-chan… right?"

Manami didn't seem confident in her assertion, which is natural considering they rarely interacted. It was just

that before, Manami and I saw Kirino while she was taking part in that photo shoot, which is why Manami recognized her this time in the first place. Even though I wouldn't have minded if she didn't recognize her…

Even though Kirino was usually seen hanging out in a throng of people, for some reason, she was alone today.

"… Hm? Kirino-chan… seems a bit down…"

"Really? I can't tell."

Hm, she really seems pretty depressed. I'm her brother after all, so I could at least tell that much.

Usually, she would be walking at a rapid pace with her head held high.

She wasn't someone who you would expect to see hunched over like that, sadly trudging back from school.

Up until yesterday, she hadn't shown any signs of being depressed…

But today, maybe something happened at school… ugh, what is she doing, acting like that…?

Come on, don't look so depressed in front of other people. That's so not like you.

At some point, I had begun to bite my lower lip.

"Hey, Manami."

"What, Kyou-chan?"

"I'm sorry. My stomach is starting to hurt, so we'll have to reschedule our study meeting."

As I faced forward and told Manami that, she simply responded with an "Alright."

Next, in an unexpected act of encouragement, Manami gave me a firm push from the back.

"Do your best, onii-chan."

Well, if you tell me that, then I guess there's no avoiding it.

When I got back home…

Kirino was in the living room on the couch, hugging a cushion and burying her face into it.

On the table, there was a glass of cola she had drank a bit of.

Unlike during summer vacation, it was very clear that she was depressed.

Well, so what? It's not like I feel any duty to worry about her, I couldn't even begin to guess what to say to her in the first place, and it's not like I was that interested in knowing what exactly was bothering her.

But, well… just now, Manami had told me to do my best.

That softhearted person was worried after seeing Kirino looking so down…

So, there was no point in arguing.

It's not like I was worried about her, but if something was bothering her it's not like I couldn't at least hear her out. [106]

"… Hey Kirino… you… didn't even turn on the lights …"

I began to move to turn on the lights, but I hesitated, and in the end decided to leave the living room in its dimly lit state. I walked to my little sister's side. My sister did not make even the slightest movement while her head was still buried in the cushion.

After a bit of hesitation, I steeled myself and began to speak.

"Hey. What's wrong? Did… something happen at school…?"

"Not really."

She vacantly mumbled while her face remained attached to the cushion. It was incredibly difficult to make out what she was saying.

But, I was relieved that she at least responded. If she were set on completely ignoring me, then there was nothing I would be able to do. So, let's take one step forward at a time.

"Did you forget your homework… or something…?"

I knew that wasn't the case, but I just wanted to test the waters.

Kirino shook her head from side to side. So that wasn't it.

"Well then… did Ayase… say something to you?"

"……."

I tried asking the real question, but this time I got no response. No response whatsoever.

Without losing heart, I asked another question.

"Could it be that… she broke her promise and spread rumors about your hobby…"

"Ayase would never do something like that!"

I widened my eyes at her angry response. If this were right before Comiket, I would feel happy that her friend was trustworthy… but how should I react to Kirino's words now?

"Did you… make up with her?"

"….."

Once again, no response. Kirino dug her face even deeper into the cushion. Seeing her do that, I could tell that she probably didn't make up with Ayase… dammit, this is going nowhere. I began to pull on the cushion.

"Come on, Kirino. Look at me for a bit. If you don't tell me anything I won't know what's going on."

"Leave me alone."

Kirino stubbornly tried to hold onto the cushion. Disregarding her attempts, I just pulled more strongly.

And then…

"Dammit! I told you to leave me alone!"

Kirino yelled, suddenly letting go of the cushion. As the pillow slipped out suddenly and I lost my balance, Kirino faced me and spoke even more angrily than she had been speaking before.

"What the hell… just because I've been talking to you a bit more lately, don't go getting used to it and acting like you're my brother or something! Don't get the wrong idea! You're disgusting!"

"Tch…"

Ah, is that so? What a lucky coincidence. I couldn't agree more.

After all, that's how it was, wasn't it? It was all just a terrible misunderstanding for me to think that our relationship had gotten just a bit better, when nothing had changed at all. Well, I'm sorry for getting carried away.

Ugh… just ugh…

But I still don't want to be told that by someone on the verge of tears.

"Ugh, it's such a pain to deal with huge idiots. As if I give a damn what you say."

"Huh?"

As Kirino's face twisted in disgust, I tossed the cushion on the floor.

Whoosh! With that, I vigorously plopped myself down on the sofa.

I sat right next to my sister, our eyes at the same level, so I could listen to her better.

"I don't care if you call me gross, I said. It's fine, so say it all you want. Just go ahead! Hah, at any rate, I'm the siscon hentai idiot brother who made the terrible mistake of thinking that I was getting closer to my little sister after all! I won't let you run away until you tell me what's going on. If you think I'm annoying, then you're best off just accepting it and giving me the whole story."

What the hell did I just say? Did I hit my head somewhere on the way here or something?

At my incoherent rambling, Kirino made a strange face .

"W-What… are you saying?"

She seemed bewildered even though she was angry at the same time, you could say.

"So, you didn't make up with Ayase?"

Ignoring her confusion, I asked my question. It was a rather forceful way of doing things, but the way things were going, it didn't seem like she would talk about it by herself.

So I really had no choice but to interrogate her like this and deduce the situation from the answers she gave.

Well, I did only have one guess as to what had happened, and it probably wasn't that far off from the truth.

I might be repeating myself, but I honestly am not worried about her. I mean, just look at the disgusted way in which she's staring at me. She probably really hates that I'm meddling in something that's none of my business…

Who in the world would want to go through so much trouble for the sake of someone like that?

But, I had already decided that I would do this. I had already told myself that I would do this. I had no intention of stopping without finishing what I had started.

After all, the blood of my stubborn father ran through my veins.

"Well?"

"… Making up with Ayase…"

Maybe having realized that yelling wouldn't get her anywhere, Kirino dropped her aggressive tone, and glared at me with tear-filled eyes.

"… There's no way… I could make up with Ayase… after… what happened…"

"Ah… I see."

That menacing glare… just thinking back to it gave me the shivers. No matter how close they had been in the past, given how harshly Ayase rejected Kirino, it's no wonder that it would be difficult for them to make up. But, judging from her reaction, what had her on the

verge of tears definitely had something to do with the situation with Ayase.

"But… you seemed completely fine the day after you had that argument with her…"

And that's why I had assumed that she had quickly got a hold of herself, had called Ayase and patched things up, and that the entire incident had reached some sort of conclusion.

So, what exactly happened to her right after the new semester started?

"I mean… I had to go to the invitational track and field training camp… so I couldn't just be depressed all the time."

"… What? … Was the training camp that important to you?"

"That's obvious, isn't it…? A lot of people other than me wanted to go to the training camp and had trained hard for it… but in the end I was the one selected. Do you really think I would go there depressed and just make it all go to waste?"

And so, she put off her depression until after the camp .

"… in shoujo manga or cell phone novels [107] sometimes you'll read about protagonists who don't do well at a big competition after they get rejected by a guy or have an argument with their friends… but screw that, I say. That's that, and this is this. Screw off, I want to say to her… I would never be like that, never."

"I see…"

She said that as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I see… as I thought, my little sister might look like a showoff on the outside, but she was strangely tough, hard on herself and on others, and an incredibly serious person.

"Have you called Ayase at any point after the incident ?"

"No. I tried a few times… but she would never pick up … and I was also pretty busy."

"… So that means… when you saw her today, it's been a while since you've faced her…"

"… Yeah."

So it seemed that there was no reason to think that my sister had made a quick recovery from this and didn't care at all.

It was just that she had other things she needed to do, so she had just endured it in the meantime.

And then the things she had to do got done, the new semester started, and she came face to face with Ayase again.

Having to look at the reason for the breakup up close … that was what caused Kirino to once again get depressed? That's why, in my eyes, it had seemed that she had already recovered, but then one day she suddenly seemed to fall into a gloomy mood again?

… That doesn't sit well with me. I think that's really quite incredible, but no matter how I look at it, it doesn't sit well with me. I can't even explain why it doesn't sit well with me, but it really doesn't.

You… why… why did you… agh, dammit! I don't even know how to put it…!

"… And today? Did you talk with Ayase today? At least for a bit."

At my question, Kirino didn't respond, instead biting her lip and looking downwards. Hm, so she couldn't talk to her, could she…

Personally, I'm not very well informed on the details of Kirino's school relationships. But, seeing her come home dejected and alone when I'm used to seeing her always surrounded by a large group of friends…

Her relationship had probably soured with those people. Kirino and Ayase were probably at the core of that group of girls, so when they saw that Kirino and Ayase had broken away from each other, they too probably also distanced themselves.

Her friend who had always, always supported her, in her work, and at school.

Ayase had said that of Kirino, and Kirino also had once proudly praised her friend.

The bonds between those two were sincerely irreplaceable.

That's why she was here, wasting away like this.

… This just makes me sick. Strangely, it pissed me off. Why did I feel this way?

"So? So… what are you going to do?"

"… What… am I going to do…?"

Kirino muttered weakly. It seemed that she had completely used up the fierce energy she had used to scream before.

Seeing my sister like this was just something I couldn't swallow. I didn't try to patronize [108] her even for a second.

"That's obvious, isn't it? What are you going to do to make up with Ayase?"

"… I… already told you… there's nothing I can do."

What is she saying? What exactly is she saying?

"She's a close friend, isn't she?"

No response. I tried again with a harsher tone.

"You're alright with how things are? Breaking up like this."

And then…

"Shut the hell up!"

Whoosh. Instead of sending a response my way, she sent a counterattack. Cling Clang! Irritated, Kirino shook off my arm [109] and threw many of the things on the table to the floor.

The crystal ashtray was upset, and the bottle of cola violently fell to the floor.

The atmosphere suddenly tensed. The explosive situation continued for another few suspenseful seconds.

"… Well? Well what?! Haven't I just been telling you to stop meddling…? Just leave me alone! It has nothing to do with you!"

"… That's true."

… It was true. It's not like she needed to tell me that. This situation really had nothing to do with me.

It wasn't as if I was trying to turn this into a life advice session like before, to let all the progress I had made [110] go to waste. Right now, this was just an issue between my sister and her estranged friend.

That was it. It was an issue that took place in a world that had nothing to do with me. However…

"… I don't like it."

"Huh?"

"I don't like it, I said! I don't like seeing you give up so easily!"

Even though it had nothing to do with me, I couldn't help myself from getting angry.

"She's your close friend, isn't she?! Your best friend?! Didn't you say that yourself?! But, then, how can you give up so easily?! There's no way you can be satisfied with how things are!!"

"I said it has nothing to do with you!"

"I cried after three days you know!"

Completely not thinking anymore and just speaking through my anger, my words no longer had any rhyme or reason to them.

"What?!"

"I mean… I mean… suddenly having a relationship with your best friend go sour… not being able to see her … being impatient and getting annoyed… but not being able to do anything about it…"

What the hell am I saying?! … Why the hell am I telling such embarrassing things to my little sister?!

Dammit! I've definitely gone strange in the head lately !

It's as if once I flipped a certain switch, I became a complete idiot!

"So laugh! Haha! Laugh at your stupid brother who cries over things like that! But, but… everyone has someone like that, right?! Someone that you don't want to separate from, that you don't even want to think about not being able to be with!"

"……."

"For you, that's how you think about Ayase… right?"

I couldn't say that I fully understood what Kirino's relationship with Ayase was like.

I also couldn't say that her relationship with Ayase was the same as my relationship with Manami.

But… it was close at least, right?

Didn't she say that Ayase was a close friend, that she was her best friend?

"… And if that's true, then this must be really hard on you. From the end of Obon until now… how many days have passed..? And in that time, you couldn't see her, she wouldn't pick up the phone… it was clear she didn't want to talk with you…"

If it were me, I wouldn't be able to take it. It would be intolerable. I didn't even want to think about it. I might die from the shock.

And so, I really couldn't swallow the fact that Kirino was giving up like this.

"But even then, why are you giving up so easily?! That 's not like you at all! The Kirino I know would fight against this! No matter how ugly the fight would get! No matter how unfavorable the odds were! Getting depressed like this at a time like this, and especially lashing out in anger… is that honestly something you would do?! You're acting just like the loser you accused me of being!!"

"… Hah, why are you being so serious about this?"

Listening to what I had to say, Kirino let out an openly cold sigh.

"Are you an idiot? … In any case, to be frank, I don't want to hear about your gross little story about you and your friend… if you cry after not seeing her for three days, why don't you two just go and jump off a bridge together? [111]"

"… What? What the hell did you just say to me…?"

"Oh look, you're getting angry. That's exactly what's so gross about you!"

"Don't screw with me…!!"

Without even thinking, I grabbed my little sister by the collar. My eyes widened and I couldn't stop trembling.

Because, looking at the face of my little sister which was now inches from my own, I saw her eyes brimming with tears.

"Let go!"

Kirino began to violently try to shake me off.

"K-Kirino… y-you…"

"Shut up! Don't think you can just come in here and start acting like my brother after all these years!!"

… What did she just say? Before I could fully register what my sister had shouted…

Bam! Something suddenly hit my face. Kirino had picked up the cushion, and struck my head with it as strongly as she could. It didn't exactly hurt, but for a second I couldn't breathe.

Not even getting a chance to recover, this time an attack came to my stomach. I could almost hear a thud as

a violent front kick was sent to my abdomen. Not being able to bear the attack, I crouched, and Kirino swung the cushion down at my head at a steep angle.

"W… Wait… S-Stop…"

"Shut up!"

Bam! "Do you have any idea how I felt going through summer vacation like that?!"

Bam! "Why are you telling me that I shouldn't be OK with the way things are?! Don't you think I already know that?!"

Bam! "But what the hell can I do?! I did something and now Ayase hates me, and she doesn't plan on giving in!! I have no idea what I should do…!!"

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Again and again and again, with every overflowing bit of emotion, she struck me.

"Ugh…" Clumsily crouching there, I protected my head with both arms. I continued to endure my sister's strikes…

Ow, I thought. That hurt. Both physically and mentally .

"Don't give up? Struggle even if the odds are against you? That's not like you? … Don't screw with me! What the hell do you think I should do?! Don't think it's that simple!!"

Between her sobs, Kirino continued to beat up on me.

"Do you think I didn't try to do anything about this?! Do you think I didn't try to fight against this? You don't know a damn thing! Not a damn, single thing! Not a thing!"

Each time I was hit, I had a feeling that I understood Kirino's true feelings a bit more.

At the same time, a new source of anger welled up in me.

… This idiot. Why couldn't she have just been straight with me before? Why did she have to be so uncooperative?

As I thought, she was hit pretty hard by this. She was just acting strong and hiding her real feelings.

And then she says she was able to put up with her feelings during summer vacation? … Bullshit…!

And then there was me. Why the hell was I such an idiot? Just because she isn't straight with me, I can't understand what my own sister is feeling? Even though I should know better than most the pain that comes from feeling like you had a break with a close friend! I guess I was still an immature good-for-nothing.

Ugh…

She was my own sister and I her only brother, so why did we have such a hard time understanding each other?

"Tch…. TCH!!"

Tightly closing both her eyes, Kirino clicked her tongue vehemently. As if she was trying to dispel her tears through pure anger.

I suddenly realized that her attacks had stopped. Kirino breathed heavily, and lowered the cushion loosely

to her side while biting her lower lip tightly. She looked like she was trying to keep herself from crying further.

Finally… in a voice I could barely hear, she muttered haltingly.

"…… Our life advice discussion…… is……. far from over……"

Even while she tried so hard to hide her weakness and look strong, she couldn't hide the tearful tone of her voice.

"…. Until the very end… take responsibility…"

Say that sooner, you idiot. Have you forgotten that I'm your brother [112]?

I couldn't put my emotions into words. Because my body and my heart were in pain… but my manhood hurt the most [113].

When I finally pulled myself together in face of the dull throbbing pain, I was the only one left in the living room. It seems that while I was tumbled over in pain, my sister had returned to her room.

But seriously, to think I just got beat up by my little sister… is there another big brother in the world like me?

"Oogh……. Ugh….. Ouch…."

Rubbing the offending part of my head a few times, I softly stood back up…. Ow, it still hurts.

With a thud, I plunked down onto the sofa, and looked up at the ceiling.

Alright… should I do it?

I thought about that while in a surprisingly refreshed mood. Once again, I had to exert effort to destroy the problems that were hounding my little sister. And what's more, my opponent this time would be Ayase, that girl who had a dark side of her personality that had completely blindsided me. It would be incredibly annoying and dangerous. Even if I could do something about it, I didn't really want to. And I didn't want to get involved with other people's problems.

But, I really couldn't say it wasn't my problem anymore.

It was just a little while ago that I lost the right to say those words.

Life advice… she had told me to make summer memories for her. And I had to take responsibility for causing her discomfort… and using my embarrassing secret as leverage, she gave me that unreasonable order.

The memory had to be something fun. It couldn't come with a foul aftertaste.

And for that reason, you could say that I was still in the middle of our life advice session. So I couldn't just abandon something like that without seeing it to an end. There was no helping it. I had to do it. Geez.

Hah. Being an older brother was not very easy… as I laughed at myself, I began to push buttons on my cell phone.

The display showed the phone number of "Aragaki Ayase." I heard the sound of the call being made.

… There might have been a reason why Ayase had suddenly had such a complete change in personality.

I thought about it. I mean, I still couldn't really believe that what had happened really happened. To think that such a gentle, kind, sincere person… such a good person like Ayase… could suddenly flip out and turn into a completely different, terrifying person, and then break off relations with a good friend like Kirino…

It was just that Kirino's ero doujinshi habit was exposed before her eyes, right? Well, I guess "just" is not the right word. The situation was a bit more serious than that… it's really a bit incomprehensible, you know?

And I mean, that's the feeling I got from the bits and pieces of Kirino's words I had collected from earlier.

So… definitely, something was up… something.

On my fifteenth attempt to make the call, I got a response. "Yes?"

"Hey, it's been a while. This is Kousaka Kyousuke."

"… Did you want something?" It was the same harsh tone as before.

"… I want to talk to you about Kirino."

After a few silent seconds, I got a response.

"Did Kirino ask you to do this?"

"Do you think she did?"

"No."

Immediate answer. I guess she knew all too well that Kirino was not that kind of person.

Suddenly, we both sighed. When I first met Ayase, I had never thought that I would be having this kind of serious conversation with her.

"Umm… well…"

Well, how should I start this…? As I struggled to find words, she went first.

"If you're asking for me to make up with her, I refuse."

She doesn't even want to talk about it… she probably acted like this towards Kirino today at school too.

And Kirino was probably pretty shocked by that.

Hmph, that girl… she has an absurdly high sense of responsibility, and if she has a reason she'll try hard to bear her problems… but once those reasons went away, she suddenly became quite fragile…

To be treated like this by a close friend was probably quite hard on her.

"So… you won't accept that she has this kind of hobby ?"

"Correct. I cannot be friends with someone who has things like that. I said that the other day too."

Ayase flatly refused, and continued her statement.

"I could ask you too what you think of all this. That your little sister has a hobby like this… well, I don't really even have to ask. Because I saw you with her at that place together."

Hey, I still haven't said anything, you know. She's just going on by herself and drawing her own conclusions.

Now that I think about it, for as long as I've known her she's been that kind of person.

"Yes, everything is your fault. It's all because you dragged Kirino into… into that kind of…"

"Wait, no. That's…"

She has it all wrong! What a terrible misunderstanding …! It was the opposite! I was the one that got dragged in!

"Don't make excuses, please. I can't believe this… why did this happen… Kirino wasn't that kind of person! You 're her brother, so you know, right? She was an amazing girl! Someone who was respected by everyone, who people relied on, myself included…"

"W-wait just a second! Wait!"

"Don't make excu-"

"Aaaaahhh!!! I told you to wait, didn't I?! Calm down! Listen to what I have to say!"

I forcefully interjected with a shout, and finally, I managed to break Ayase off from her monologue. She seemed quite disgruntled at having been cut off before she could proudly tell me to not make excuses.

"… What is it then?"

"… Did you talk with Kirino today?"

I really needed to be clear on what exactly had happened. Could it be that she…

"Or, did you not? Did you just ignore her… or something?"

"No, we talked. Just a bit. But there was no point."

If I interjected, she probably would get angry, so I obediently waited for her to continue.

Hey, don't look at me as if I was doing something pathetic. I'm seriously scared here.

"I was really close with Kirino. That's not true anymore, but we were really close, Onii-san. So… don't you think it's obvious I want to heal our relationship, that I want for us to go back to the way things were?"

Yeah… breaking up with a close friend was really hard . It was definitely clear that she would want to heal their relationship and return to the way things were. I had just experienced something similar, after all…

I know. All too well. I understand, and that's why I'm here talking to her like this.

I wasn't sure how Ayase was taking my silence… but she kept on going.

"… So… that's what I told her. 'Can you stop doing things like that?' I asked her. 'I want us to be friends again, so I really don't want things to turn out this way. So could you throw it all away and forget about it?' I asked. During summer vacation, I also couldn't stop thinking about this… but I couldn't go against my own feelings… still, I really like Kirino… and I want to continue to really liking Kirino… so I tried to compromise with her on this."

When she spoke like that, the frightening atmosphere dispersed, and Ayase returned to the kind girl who had deep feelings for her close friend. I really don't think I was mistaken when I got the impression before that she was a good person. But… in the next instant, the atmosphere chilled.

"And what do you think Kirino said to that?"

I can guess. I can probably imagine what she said precisely, word for word.

What she probably said first was…

"'Definitely not,' she told me! … I couldn't believe it… even though I had begged her like that…! Even though I had asked her to make up with me…! 'Definitely not,' she said… that's so terrible…"

Don't cry… Dammit, she's much harder to deal with than my father was. No matter if it was my sister or her, I felt helpless when a girl began to cry in front of me. I spoke, trying to cheer her up.

"But… she doesn't mean that she doesn't want to make up with you, you know?"

"It's all the same! She means that that hobby is more important than I am, right?! I thought we were close… but that was completely not true…!!"

"Well, what about you?"

With a more aggressive tone of voice, I asked my question.

"Certainly, you might say that Kirino is not like normal people and has a not-so-great hobby. Well, let me just ask, do you really think that something like that is enough of a reason to cut off your relationship with Kirino? Do you really think, just because she likes something you don't understand, that's a good reason to start hating a close friend? So, what about that?"

"Something like that? Something like that, did you say ?"

"Yes, I did. So what? Don't get me wrong… I have not the slightest of intentions of supporting her hobby. But, I don't think her hobby is something that should break apart two close friends."

"That's because you also have the same hobby, isn't it? "

NO! … I wanted to say, but she probably wouldn't believe me. What's more, honestly, after spending time with my sister and her friends, and after going to that event, my prejudices against otaku had died down.

So, it was true that I saw these types of otaku hobbies in a different light than Ayase did.

But, even so. Was there some other reason for all this? I really couldn't believe that just because Kirino had a weird hobby, Ayase would cut ties with her.

"Maybe. But if I have to say it, you don't exactly understand what Kirino's hobby is about either, right? You're hating something without even understanding it. "

I tried to convince Ayase with the same line of reasoning I had used on my father. But…

"My mother is the president of the PTA."

Ayase spoke sharply.

"PTA?"

Having such a strange word coming at me seemingly out of context, I tilted my neck.

What exactly did that have to do with what we were talking about?

"Sometimes I help my mother when she has periodic meetings… at those meetings, we sometimes have guest speakers, journalists who have spoken on television

before… what they tell us is that Japan, as a nation, is one of the most prominent suppliers of child pornography in the world, and suspicious products like that run unchecked especially in Akihabara. It's a really serious problem, if you ask me… The same person told us that the House of Representatives [114] recently was presented with a petition asking them to enact a law regulating the manufacture and distribution of adult anime and games featuring young girls."

"… Adult… regulation… petition?"

What was going on… I had a bad feeling about where this was going… [115]

"Yes. To summarize, it was something calling for the regulation of adult games and anime. It was originally a petition presented by members of the House of Councilors. If you do those kinds of things, you would unwittingly destroy your mind and lose your humanity."

Although Ayase was speaking in a very orderly manner, she gradually got more and more worked up.

"There were a few products mentioned on a handout they distributed at the meeting. There were manga and

computer games in which you defile little girls, lock them up and enjoy doing perverted things to them… I couldn't believe that there were people who would look at these things, who would play with them and actually have fun while doing it. I don't even really want to remember what happened in that incident… but certainly, the things Kirino had at that time were all those types of things, right? Yes?"

Faced with the waves of disapproval coming off Ayase , I didn't really know how to respond.

So, the PTA did things like that too? Really, petitions… ? Regulations…?

Nothing but pointless thoughts and questions ran through my head.

"That kind of disgusting hobby… if you can even call something dirty like that a 'hobby'… to find out that a close friend had something like that… isn't is obvious that I would try to stop it? Would a friend really just give her permission to do this kind of thing and approve of it? I really don't think so, so if she definitely won't give it up , I can't continue to associate with her. Even if she was a close friend."

If this were a few weeks ago, I probably wouldn't have had a single problem with what she was saying, and would have approved of it as a commendable way of thinking.

I mean, even now, I had to admit that Ayase's overly serious line of reasoning was sound…

I cocked my head to the side. But I don't have to tell her that, right?

Was I acting this way because I already was well on my way to being an otaku? Had my head gone funny?

Considering what we were talking about, I didn't want to argue back against this junior high school girl and make myself seem like a big hentai… but before I knew it I had opened my mouth.

"Well, I mean, from your point of view, it probably seems disgusting or dirty… if that's what you say you think, then all I can say is 'ah, alright.' But, this really isn't something worthy of such an overreaction… I mean, they're just books and games, right?"

"What if I told you that under influence by those things you call 'just games,' people have committed

crimes?! There was that incident before summer vacation , that was on the news… umm… the 'Siscali Attempted Murder Case!'"

"S-Siscali… Attempted Murder Case?"

"Yes. Did you not know? Hold on… just a second. I know I have it around here…"

I heard a clattering noise on the other end of the line. It seemed as if she was preparing the appropriate documents.

"… It was a case where a man tried to electrocute a girl to death and was caught. That man was part of that group of potential criminals they call 'otaku,' and seemed to do what he did under the influence of the 18+ game 'Little Sister Wars – Siscalypse.' He confessed that he wanted to act like he did in the game and yearned for the game characters… they also confiscated a large number of disgusting books and games from that man's room."

In her anger, Ayase threw her judgmental words at me .

"Among the disgusting books that Kirino dropped that day, there were even a few that were listed on this document! I saw 'Siscalypse' written on some, right?! Doesn't that mean Kirino has the same game as that murderer did?!"

I see… I see. I see all too well… I know exactly what's going on now. I can understand now why you suddenly became so hysterical when you read that doujinshi, and why you became so pale then.

In other words, she really was just worried about Kirino.

Her important friend might have turned into a potential criminal. Like that, Kirino might destroy her mind and lose her humanity.

… What should I do? What should I do… what should I do… what should I do?!

So, that's what this situation had become. Ayase continued her speech in a bitter tone.

"… So, alright? How can you justify something like that… those types of games and manga, and everything

similar to that kind of thing… it's unforgivable that such things exist in this world! And the people who want such things, and the people who make such things, everyone is the same: potential criminals! These are things we need to closely regulate and harshly control! And these things are absolutely not things Kirino should give involved with!! Give me back my Kirino! Give her back!"

Click.

And I was utterly shut down. I mustered my courage and tried to redial her number, but Ayase didn't pick up again.

"… What the hell…"

I sighed heavily.

I had expected the conversation to be tough, but it had been even more difficult than I had imagined.

Ayase wasn't just simply speaking out of the pure prejudice against otaku that many girl junior high students possessed. She was trying to get Kirino to stop her hobby for Kirino's sake. Up to that point, her actions were identical with my father's that one time. But Ayase had presented real evidence that supported her opinion,

her disgust against otaku. She was a very difficult opponent. Probably even more than my father had been.

I wouldn't be able to change her opinion without trying my utmost.

"… 'Siscali Attempted Murder Case,' huh… to think I would hear something like that at a time like this…"

If I thought about it now, the reason why Kirino had become so depressed is probably because she had met with Ayase while Ayase was acting like that. It was truly a helpless, lamentable situation.

"… Hm."

But, what just happened? What was up with that argument? From what I heard (and her one-sided tone that was filled with genuine worry probably had something to do with this), she was definitely quite persuasive, and her argument even had a basis in real fact. But… how should I put it… there was just something I couldn't accept about her line of reasoning.

Honestly, it might be because I had met Kirino's otaku friends, and even had gone to an event with them… and had felt a feeling of friendship budding with them. Or

rather, it might have been because I had played the very game, “Siscali,” that had motivated that crime, had practiced it, and had even cleared it… so probably, I was biased in favor of it.

I didn’t know what it was, but for now I knew I couldn ’t accept what she had said.

Even I wouldn’t say that there weren’t bad influences that existed in games, manga, or on the Internet. Your precious time melts away to nothing; it’s not really a good thing to waste your childhood watching bishoujo anime, and the only place they talk so proudly about playing eroge are on restricted communities.

Once you go outside and look at it from the perspective of normal common sense, it wasn’t something you could puff your chest out about.

I mean, that’s why Kirino had been so troubled back then when she couldn’t find anybody to talk to about her own hobby.

People could say that these things have a bad influence on her.

But, just by being an otaku, could a good person really be turned into a bad person, or could someone who would never commit a crime really be transformed into a criminal?

For example… if you read a manga in which they kill people, or play a brutal game, would you really start to want to kill people?

I mean, maybe the guy who killed the other person was an idiot in the first place. If he was just a normal human, people wouldn't have an issue, right? It wasn't games or whatever that was the issue, but rather was a problem with his character, wouldn't you say?

But let's say for the sake of argument that he fell under the evil influence of games and became a criminal. Even if he hadn't played games, wouldn't he have just found some other reason to commit crimes? However you say it , reality will always be a much stronger influence on people than games.

It was impossible to make a game that was more real than reality.

It was impossible to even think about what that kind of game would be like.

So, even if she had evidence like that, it just didn't convince me.

It's just that, this was my own personal opinion, and didn't go further than that.

It was impossible for me to convince Ayase with this personal opinion alone.

"… What should I do?"

Kirino and Ayase both wanted to make up with each other.

But Kirino had absolutely no intentions on giving up her hobby, and Ayase had absolutely no intentions on approving of that hobby. They couldn't meet eye to eye [116].

And… even if their relationship would never be the same, I wanted to see them make up with each other. Although from the bottom of my heart, I couldn't care less about my damn little sister.

Life advice… it was because I had already involved myself in something like that, so I would do what I could .

And also, I couldn't tolerate the thought, couldn't stomach the fact that close to me, two good friends were being breaking up with each other. Because I can relate to how painful such an experience can be. So I wanted to do something if I could.

Even if this wasn't about my sister, I would feel like that.

First of all… that girl had said that otaku were " potential criminals."

That included not just me and Kirino, but Kuroneko and Saori as well.

Of course, I didn't really care what bad things people said about otakus in general…

But if someone spoke badly about my friends, could I really just stay silent about it?

Obviously not, right?

After that, I thought for a while about the situation in my room.

About how I could get them to make up with each other. About how I could get her to take back those ugly things she had said about my friends. About what I could do and what I couldn't.

"……"

Things I should do… there were a few things I could do.

First, I would borrow Kirino's computer, and look on the Internet.

Then, I could… ask for help on this situation… from someone…

I could have laughed at myself for so suddenly resorting to relying on others, but I understood all too well what little power I had myself. An extremely normal , seventeen year old high school student. That was who I was.

If someone more dependable than I was could lend me their strength, and then could help me achieve my goals

more effectively, then that would be great. Call me uncool if you want, call me pathetic if you want, but I would do anything I could think of that would help.

I would do what I could. So, I had to exhaust every thread of strength I had.

But, who exactly should I ask…? The person I would feel most comfortable talking about this with, the person who was the best informed about these types of situations, was Saori… but I wanted to leave that option aside for now. Kuroneko too. I had said I would exhaust all my strength… but I didn't want to worry those two over this matter. They've already helped us out more than enough… I really didn't want to ask them to help me out of this messy situation on top of that.

Well, certainly, Saori would probably say something like "there's no need to thank me"…

This was why asking Saori or Kuroneko for help was, to me, the last of the last of options.

Speaking of Kirino, she had probably also done whatever was in her power to do to resolve this situation. She probably had exhausted all possibilities available to her. And even then she was reduced to such a sorry state,

so even if I went to her at this point and asked for advice, no good ideas would come out of that. Instead, we probably would just end up arguing again.

So… then… the remaining candidate was…

"……"

I meditated on it for almost a minute, but finally I narrowed my eyes, my mind in a complicated state.

… there was someone. If I really wanted to, there was just one person…

Someone who would seriously give me advice, who was incredibly well-informed about things like the " Siscali Attempted Murder Case" or the "PTA meeting" or the "regulations on bishoujo adult material," someone who would never tell anybody else, and from whom I could hope for effective advice…

B-But… that person was… that person was……. ugh… This couldn't be happening…

As I thought about the one person who could help me here, my resolution was unsteady…

Deep creases ran through my forehead, and for a while I groaned.

"A-Alright…"

Finally making up my mind, I collapsed onto my bed, my face sickly pale.

Dammit. I'm not actually hurt, but I feel a throbbing pain in my cheek…

It was night on the same day. Finding just the right time, I walked towards the living room.

In the living room, my dad was sitting on the sofa and enjoying his customary evening drink. Happily, I could not see my mother anywhere. Maybe she had gone to take a bath.

"D-Dad…"

"… Oh, Kyousuke. What do you need?"

My father's face gave off the impression of some terrifying yakuza, and if I had to compare him to an animal, I would say he gave off the impression of a gorilla. He was incredibly rough. And so he worked as a

police officer. With his fierce pointed stare that I had often seen on Kirino, he probably struck fear into the hearts of criminals.

Before summer vacation, I had confronted this person. To get him to accept Kirino's hobby.

Looking back on it, it was pretty incredible how well things had worked out then. It was good that everything had gone miraculously well, but if I had failed, I really might have had to shave my head and by now would have joined a Buddhist temple. To be frank, I would go as far as to say it was strange that I had escaped from that episode mostly unscathed.

And… honestly, since then, I had barely talked with my father.

My father never broke promises he made, so there was no reason to believe that he would still be in a foul mood about what had happened, but ever since then things had been strangely awkward. At that time, I had said some pretty out of character, angry things, so I did wonder how the situation may have looked to him… know what I mean?

Umm… well. You might ask me, if I feel so awkward and weak about this, why am I voluntarily coming to him? … Well, that's hard to say, really…

"Kyousuke, I asked you what you needed, didn't I? You want to talk to me about something, correct?"

"A-Ahh… yeah. I d-do…"

"Hm… is it about your future?"

"No…"

Sorry, that's not it, dad… I'm really, really sorry. I feel really bad about this…

Please listen…

"I need advice on something… mainly on the 18+ games thing…"

"……
……
……." [117]

H-He's not saying anything. D-Dad?

"… Ah… I think I'm getting a bit hard of hearing. Sorry Kyousuke, please say that again."

In an unusually good mood, my father smiled dryly and downed the contents of his sake cup.

He still believed that Kirino didn't have any 18+ games… so I had to pretend like the subject of discussion was myself.

Umm… what should I say? Let's try to tread softly and carefully…

"Dad… the truth is… a little bit ago, I accidentally dropped some 18+ goods on the road, and one of my good friends, a girl, now hates me. What should I do?"

Hack! Cough! Hack! Hack!

The sake spilled out onto his face. "Cough! Cough! Hack…!" My father looked just like he was having an asthma attack. He grasped onto his chest with one hand, while the other flailed randomly in midair.

C-Crap! Even I was at a loss for words. I jumped the gun and asked him straight on!

"A-Are you alright, dad…?! H-Here's some water!"

I held a glass full of water out to him, and my dad took it and gulped down the contents.

"Haah…….. Hah, hah…"

He stood up, drenched in sweat, and his shoulders moved up and down.

He clunked the glass down hard on the table.

"Idiot son!! Of all things, what in the world are you trying to ask me advice about?!"

A huge shout! In the midst of that electrically charged atmosphere, I stretched both my hands out in front of me and spoke apologetically.

"Well, I mean, at an event I bought a lot of ero manga, and I banged into her on the way home…"

"Who the hell was asking for details?! That's not what I meant!"

"I-I know…"

… Ohh… dad… even when you're angry, you can retort appropriately like that…

"So, what is going on?! That matter was already laid to rest, wasn't it?! If there's a reason for you to be bringing it up again, please tell me!!"

"T-There was something I wanted to confirm with you ! With you, dad! Please… listen to me! I beg you! Help us through this!"

I prostrated myself and begged him.

"… What did you say?"

Yes. I had a good reason for doing something as outrageous as this.

It was all so I could find a way to convince Ayase.

Even if he sent me flying, I needed him on this matter. And then…

"……. Go ahead."

"Aah… there was something I heard about the other day, and I wonder if you knew about it…"

With an extremely strained expression, my father listened to my story from start to end.

It was after school the next day.

"So? You said you had something to talk with me about. What is it?"

I was beside the school Kirino went to, face to face with Aragaki Ayase.

On her way home from school, Ayase was in the same uniform I had seen some time ago, and was grasping her school bag tightly.

Her eyes gave off the impression that she was expecting to enter into a duel at any second.

She was clearly on her guard. It was to be expected, but it was still an undesirable situation.

We were meeting in a small children's playground. It was a place where I had often played with Manami as a child, but now, the slide, jungle gym, and even the swings had been demolished, with nothing remaining other than a sand pit. There wasn't even a single child playing here, in this unbearably lonely place.

But, thinking about the conversation that lay in front of me, this was, on the contrary, a convenient place.

I had called Ayase out to this place with a text. She didn't answer her phone, so I was ready for my text to be ignored as well. But here we were.

"That's obvious, isn't it? I want to talk about Kirino."

"That conversation is already over."

Ayase flatly refused.

"If that's all you wanted, then I'll be taking my leave."

"Wait wait, hold on a bit. Why are you jumping to conclusions like that? Please, just listen to what I have to say."

"Is there a need to? My thoughts and conclusions are just as I told to you yesterday…. If I can, I want to get Kirino to change her ways. To get her to stop that hobby, and return her to her right senses. But…"

Ayase calmly made her statement, and then bit her lip.

She didn't have to go on for me to know what she wanted to say. Kirino would never throw away her hobby. Even when her public image is threatened, or when her parents strongly disapproved, she would always like what she liked.

I had seen her ridiculously stubborn determination first hand.

"Why would she… go that far…"

That's… really something Ayase can't understand, I think.

Why is it that, even though she was warned so earnestly by her close friend, such warnings went in one ear and out the other? Even though Ayase had not said anything that was obviously wrong… whether it was that the hobby Kirino had was disgusting and repulsive, or that someone like Kirino really shouldn't get close to things like that.

… Could it be, that I was mistaken in thinking they were close friends…?

… It was natural that I would think something like that.

This girl hated otaku even more than my father did. She had been taken in by the one-sided otaku bashing that existed in the world, and had embraced a strong prejudice against them. Of course, within that prejudice there were things that might not have been far off the mark. In Ayase, aside from her prejudice, there was a part of the otaku psychology that she just might not be able to accept. At a glance, she was a girl who prided herself on cleanliness and purity.

"What kind of people do you think are the most prejudiced against otaku?" Kirino had said to me. The answer was girls in junior high school… she was probably speaking with her own close friend in mind.

She was a very serious, pure, kind, honest, and a bit prejudiced person…

My evaluation of Ayase was not mistaken.

She was definitely not a bad person. I would instead say that she is an extremely good person.

… How many friends of mine can I count that would get this angry for my sake?

"… Onii-san. I have a request."

"… What is it?"

"Won't you talk to her too? I really do want to get her to stop."

Ayase still was under the impression that I was an otaku. She thought that I was repulsive and disgusting, that my mind had broken and I was just a potential criminal. And yet…

"Please help me. My… my own words don't seem to get through to her… so…"

To think that she would lower her head to someone that she hates as much as me.

This was probably the reason she even came to meet with me here today.

Because she wanted to get her most important friend back. She wanted to save her from going down a bad road.

… In some ways, doesn't it seem like I'm the bad guy here? It's not like I can claim to be the good guy in this situation…

"I can't. I really can't."

"No matter what?"

Ayase asked me while bowing.

"Yeah, no matter what."

Even if I did talk to Kirino, it's not like I would be able to get her to stop.

In the first place, that wasn't what I had come here to talk about.

Having been bluntly refused by me, Ayase quickly raised her head.

Was it just me, or did it seem like the light had gone out in her eyes?

"Her reputation is going to be destroyed, you know? … Even if I said that?"

"…… You wouldn't do something like that, I think."

"How would you know what I would and wouldn't do?"

"Because Kirino told me so."

I didn't give any response further than that. Ayase's eyes widened, and I saw the light return to them.

Well… this seems to be a good time. I've finished reaffirming the situation, so let's get to the main topic at hand.

"So… Ayase, to put everything briefly, what you're saying is the following. 'Kirino's hobby is disgusting and repulsive and she should not have it.' 'But even so, Kirino won't throw her hobby away.' 'So, I cannot hang around such a person. And I can't make up with her.' That about right?"

"… Yes. And?"

The problem here was simple. So, from here, how should I get these two to make up with each other?

First, there was Ayase's demand that I should go and try to talk Kirino out of her hobby.

But, needless to say, I would not choose that option. And that limited what options I could take.

What are those, you ask? …Well, just watch. For now, there were a few things I could try. Including my ace in the hole.

I had even taken off from school to prepare that one.

Honestly, I didn't know if it would work or not, but I could only try and see.

"You said a lot of things to me on the phone… and I did a bit of research on them."

"Research?"

"Yeah. In summary… about the Siscali Attempted Murder Case, what various commentators have been saying about otaku on the news, the PTA meeting you participated in, the child pornography issue in Japan, and etcetera."

… Yesterday, when she was throwing blame around while weaving various examples into her argument, I could not respond at all.

So… earlier, I had gone to my father, who had spoken harshly of otaku with similar reasoning before, to ask for his wisdom on the matter.

"Of all things, you're coming to me to ask about that… ? That's quite brave of you."

And after that, even though he looked less than pleased throughout, he explained things to me in unexpectedly fine detail…

-

"But what a coincidence… I happen to know a bit about that case. About the petition on bishoujo adult anime and games as well. At the very least, I should know more about these things than that girl… hmph, of course, it was just because that article coincidentally caught my eye that I know about it…"

"You mentioned that her mother was the president of the PTA… you're probably talking about congressman

Aragaki's wife, right? If that's true, then I also coincidentally happen to know about the meeting that her daughter participated in. If I recall correctly…"

"That document you talked about… I have a copy as well… don't misunderstand. It's just that, coincidentally, last month, a coworker at the station happened to give a copy to me."

"Oh, I know that journalist quite well. Coincidentally, I happened to do a bit of research on him recently.

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How can all of that have been a coincidence?! But if I made that remark he might have killed me, so I forced myself to keep silent.

When I struck out at him that one time with my warning that he shouldn't go saying unfounded things about topics he doesn't know about, he must have taken those words to heart in his own way.

So he went and researched various things about otaku, examined the rumors going around on television about these things, to try to understand this thing that his two children were trying so hard to protect.

Amazing, isn't it? My father, that is. He had told us " just do whatever the hell you want!" but was doing things like this behind it all. Studying up a bit on otaku like this.

For our sake. In order to protect us from getting involved in anything truly dangerous… that's pretty great, really.

Although, if he started playing eroge too, I'd run away from home and go get adopted by the Tamura household .

"The document you were talking about, it's this, right? "

"That… what's that?"

Taking out the document I had prepared for this meeting from my bag, I thrust it at Ayase.

"Let me just put it outright. What's written here is utter nonsense. There is no clear evidence linking the otaku hobby with these crimes as you had suggested. Not for now, at least."

"Eh…?"

For a moment, Ayase stared blankly at me as if she couldn't process what I just said, but her expression stiffened immediately.

"B-But! On the news, there was… and it was a congressman too…!"

"The petition that you brought up that was submitted to the House of Representatives was also based on shaky evidence. You said that when people played eroge, they would unconsciously break their minds and lose their humanity? Well, then it's a matter of how exactly you know that's true. Because, if someone could lose their mind just by playing games, then he probably wasn't a decent person to begin with. Just think about it."

"I-I did think about it! This is all just your own personal opinion, isn't it?!"

"Yeah, it is. But, I'm not the only person who thinks this way. There are people in the Diet who also are more conservative on this issue. There was another petition, with hundreds of signatures, in which people requested that if we change the laws against child pornography, we should not be hasty and take a very cautious approach. I

might be stating the obvious, but there are several different opinions on this matter. The Diet is a suitable place for debates like this after all. Just because a petition is handed to the House of Representatives, that doesn't mean that the contents of that petition are definitely correct. So, even if I give you this document right here, that does not form the basis for rejecting the otaku hobby ."

"Ugh..!"

Trying to keep her temper, Ayase shouted.

"But, in reality, there are people like this who have become criminals, haven't there been?! The commentators have all said that, haven't they?!"

"In regards to the 'Siscali Attempted Murder Case,' that was blown completely out of proportion. While it's true that outside of Siscali, the criminal had a lot of other 18+ games, the contention that his games were the cause of him falling into crime is an outright lie. Certainly, he said that he 'mimicked the game characters and tried to electrocute a woman,' but he later retracted that statement. 'I wanted to rough up a girl, so I waved my modded stun gun around,' he later said… of course, it's

not clear which one of his statements is true. Taking a close-up look at his motives, there's absolutely no need to talk about the influence of these games. It's just that, when they first were reporting on this matter, it was very easy for them to make a connection between the ' influence of games' and the 'attempted murder.'"

All in one breath.

"And then the media made it out to be this huge thing and labeled it with the name you know, as the 'Siscali Attempted Murder Case.' And at that critical moment, the famous commentators continued to beat on otaku, and kept on talking about the eroge they found in the criminal's room and showing pictures of Akihabara. It's pretty difficult to just take it all back and apologize after doing all that. I'm not sure that's really why, but for now, I can say that I've yet to see a single news article where they admit that it really wasn't the game's fault."

"That's… but, that person's always helped out my mother so much…"

Ayase desperately flipped through the document I had handed over to her.

It was almost as if she was trying to find something in there that would refute what I was saying.

"I'm not saying that every single thing he said was an outright lie. And I'm not saying that every journalist who bashes otaku is a fraud. But at least this time, to push the things he himself believed in, that journalist manipulated the situation to fit his own views. If you think I'm lying, go and look into the matter yourself."

"……."

Ayase clearly seemed shaken, and bit her lip. I could hear her grumbling "Lies… it was a lie, a lie lie lie" almost as if she was chanting a curse, and it was honestly quite unsettling. She was a clean, pure, honest person, and so when she was lied to like this, she rejected it to that extent… it was pretty amazing.

"… You said otaku were just potential criminals, so won't you take that back? I mean, there are probably bad people who are otaku too. But they aren't all like that. Remember when you asked if those two people were Kirino's friends? Those two really strangely dressed

people. They were my friends. They're reaaaally good people! So please, don't lump all otaku together and speak badly of them like that…!"

This matter was something that was just as important to me as getting Kirino and Ayase to make up with each other.

The one thing I had to get Ayase to take back was her remark about all otaku being criminals.

That was one duty I, as their friend, could not neglect.

"… Kirino said something similar, you know."

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing… I understand, to the very end, I was mistaken on this matter. There is no such connection between otaku and criminals. Satisfied?"

"I-I see! Then…"

"But, I still have no intention of approving of Kirino having that kind of hobby."

Rejected. Ayase didn't even let me pursue the issue. With creases forming across my forehead, I asked.

"… Why?"

"Why? That's obvious, isn't it?! So there isn't a connection between this and crime… so what, I ask?! There's still no mistaking that it's a dirty, repulsive hobby, is there?!"

"You may think that. But, and I might be repeating myself here, I don't think that's enough to justify breaking up with a close friend. I'm not telling you to accept her hobby. However I think about it, those things are not good things. I understand that much. But, can't you just pretend you didn't see anything? … Pretend that you didn't see anything… and just be her friend like you have been up to now? … She knows herself all too well that this hobby isn't something she can make public. That 's why she's gotten so good at separating the two sides of herself."

"That's true, isn't it? Hiding it so well… and continuing to trick us like that."

"She wasn't trying to trick you. There was just no need for you to know! Of course, she was also trying to protect her public image… but first and foremost, she didn't want to lose her close friend! You two are close, right? Why can't you even understand what she was trying to do here?!"

"Liar! That's a huge lie! After all, Kirino thinks that this hobby of hers is more important than I am, doesn't she?! Even though today and yesterday, I begged her to stop! Even though I begged her to heal our relationship…! 'I definitely don't want to,' that's all she could say…!"

"That's not right! That's definitely not what she meant by that…!"

"Shut up! Don't act as if you know what's going on! What do you know about us?! I know Kirino better than anybody else does! But even then, to think she would do that kind of…! That person wasn't Kirino! It was someone else! Definitely someone else! An imposter…! Give her back! You're hiding the real Kirino somewhere, aren't you?! Give me back my friend!!"

… This is hopeless. Completely hopeless, I think. I really can't convince this girl.

To this girl, this situation probably seemed like Kirino had joined some strange religion or something.

Ayase truly was concerned for Kirino's well-being, truly valued Kirino highly, and truly was fond of her. That's why she couldn't condone the present situation. She couldn't condone her friend corrupting herself.

That's not like you. You're not like that!

… A certain someone had once said something similar … and had gotten angry with similar sentiments.

But what gives me the right to criticize Ayase? We're birds of a feather, really. Projecting a certain image of someone in our minds, but realizing that in reality that person was different, and then getting angry about it. And then getting sad about it. And then falling into despair over it.

It was really a selfish thing. But this was a pitfall that occurred naturally when people got together. Especially for friends, or for people we loved and respected, that's the way we wanted things to be.

There was only one person in the world who could refute these feelings from the other side.

There was only one person who could hit me across the face, who could kick me in the privates, with a shout of “don’t screw with me!”

Yes.

-

“Stop screwing around! Shut it with the ‘imposter imposter’ nonsense!”

-

Yeah, just like that.

“……”

“Kirino…?!”

At the sudden loud scream, Ayase and I simultaneously turned around.

The uniformed form of Kirino was walking quickly towards us from the playground entrance.

Her head was held as high as it always was, and she came towards us at a fast pace.

"Y-You….. why are you here…?!"

"You shut up too. Does that really matter?"

Kirino shut me up with one fierce stare.

"Don't butt your face into our business. This is something I have to do myself!"

…….. That's true, isn't it? You knew that all along, didn't you?

"… Ah. Sorry for intruding."

I gave a strained smile. As I went to turn over the situation to Kirino, she shooed me off with her hands.

"If you understand, go away. Just go and die somewhere."

That was uncalled for! Who the hell do you think that I went through all this for?!

See?! Isn't it just like I said?! You heard what she just said, didn't you?! Honestly, her mind had been broken and she had lost her humanity waaay before she got into eroge! It had nothing to do with the influence of games! My sister was just always like this! I seriously could cry here!

Don't you think that it's much more likely my mind gets broken from my real life situation than from eroge?

Ugh… but it really does seem like she rebounded.

And she's not acting like her usual fake, sweet persona at all, even though she's in front of Ayase!

But, well… if it's come this far, they're going to take off any thick masks they've had on, speak sincerely, be frank with each other, and start arguing… I don't think it can pan out any other way. For Kirino or for Ayase.

… Tch, ahh. In the end, my efforts didn't really matter.

It's like this after all. As I could have guessed, it would have to ultimately be the people involved who had to work this out.

… Do your best, Kirino.

It wasn't like I was expecting my thoughts to reach Kirino, but at that moment Kirino seemed to get reenergized and turned to face Ayase. She confronted her close friend with a tense expression.

"Ayase… listen to what I have to say."

"… I don't want to listen to anything an imposter like you has to say."

Ayase shook her head stubbornly. She shouted with bared fangs.

"Let me meet the real Kirino!"

"What is 'the real Kirino'?"

The Kirino that stood before me was a completely different person than the Kirino who was completely overwhelmed by Ayase back in that other incident.

She haughtily puffed out her chest, and with energy that matched the intensity of the furious Ayase, she faced her opponent head on.

"A beautiful girl, someone with distinguished fashion sense, a sports prodigy, and someone who excels at her schoolwork. She has a lot of friends, she is looked up to by everyone at school, has a great rapport with her teachers, flourishes in her club activities, is even a model outside of school, is relied on by everyone, is loved by everyone… she's absolutely perfect, amazingly cool, super cute, really beautiful. That Kousaka Kirino, you mean?"

I didn't know anybody else who could so confidently praise themself like that. It must be refreshing to be able to go so far with self-praise. She really loves herself, doesn't she? [118]

"Is that what you mean by the real me?"

"Yes! That's Kirino, isn't it?! Even when we go out shopping, even when we're surrounded by boys in town, even when there's something in school I don't understand, even when I feel overwhelmed with modeling, even when we put on a show at the culture

festival… to me you were always… you were always with… but…"

"But it's strange for me to get close to such a hobby? It's impossible? It's not like me? I'm dirty and repulsive, an imposter? Sorry, Ayase, but that's a complete misunderstanding."

"… Mis…understanding?"

"Yes, so just listen to me… although, I'm not sure if I can say this well…"

Facing her bewildered friend, Kirino began to speak.

"… Well, for me, I really love those manga that you hate and think are repulsive. I also have many of those 18 + games that you think are dirty and make you nauseous , and I love those as well. No matter how many times I watch anime with cute little girls, I can't get enough, and just looking at all the goods I bought is enough to make me happy. It really is a strong love like that. You could say I adore them. No matter what anybody else says, that is me."

Ayase looked like she wanted to say something, but it seemed as if she couldn't put it into words.

Sorry, Kirino was saying.

Sorry that I'm not the person you hoped I was. But, this is me.

That's what it sounded to me like she was trying to say .

"So, I know that you're really worried about me, but please don't be. I definitely don't want to give up this hobby. It's something I like. What I like is what I like. If I stop it, if my hobby becomes no more, I would not be myself anymore…"

Like she had once done with me before, Kirino let out her own feelings. She laid herself bare.

As if she couldn't understand what was happening before her eyes, Ayase shook her head a number of times .

"… It's something that's more important to you than your friends? That hobby… it's more important than me? !"

"That's not true!"

"But-"

Kirino cut off Ayase before she could continue, and shouted with all her strength.

"I love you just as much as I love eroge!! It's not a lie! Why won't you understand?! If I could just choose one, I wouldn't have been so troubled to begin with!! My school friends as well! My otaku hobby as well! All of these things are incredibly important, precious things that I can't throw away, and that's the reason why things have come this far, isn't it?!"

"W-W-Wha…"

Having been struck with that heavy killing blow, Ayase stumbled a step and wavered.

She probably was flushed bright red because there was not a shred of dishonesty in Kirino's words, and her message had gotten completely across. I didn't know if she was angry, happy, embarrassed… or some combination of the three. Facing her blushing, bewildered friend, Kirino put on the pressure.

"Alright, Ayase? I don't have any intention of throwing away any of these things. Neither my friends, nor my hobby, so I've decided! I'm definitely going to make up with you! And I'm definitely not stopping my hobby! You have a problem with that?!"

Well, things just got serious. This idiot! Don't say something so unreasonable!

But… there was nothing more like my sister than this arrogant, haughty side of her.

This was the genuine, bona fide Kousaka Kirino. Ayase probably understood that as well.

She really was this kind of person. Her close friend should know about that, right?

"…… You're…… not lying? I'm also really….. important to you…?"

Ayase seemed to be taking a few moments to digest what Kirino had said, and finally spoke.

"I… understand your feelings. I also…… misunderstood in a lot of places. I got taken in by other

people's opinions… and said some terrible things… that was wrong of me. Sorry. I'm really… sorry."

Ayase bowed very deeply.

"I… also want to make up…. With Kirino…"

"… Yeah."

Kirino smiled shyly. From the beginning, both of them had wanted to quickly make up with each other. Now that they had been able to speak frankly with each other, it seemed that they had finally come to understand that … geez, what a roundabout way of doing things. They should have just done that from the very beginning… well, I can't say I acted completely correctly too. I also had misunderstood her feelings, got angry, and was worried without knowing what to do about it.

To be honest, I barely did anything here. It was ultimately Kirino's own efforts that allowed her to make up with her close friend. It was because she had gathered up her courage and had told Ayase her true feelings.

" I love you just as much as I love eroge!!"

She certainly got her feelings across. It was a hopeless situation to the end, but she got them across with her strongest words.

… I mean, to think that she was able to solve the issue saying something like that… I felt it was a just a bit counterintuitive.

If anybody else had used that line in any situation, they couldn't possibly hope for results this good.

Here and now, all the more because Kirino was facing Ayase, those words had their effect.

"Hah… somehow…"

In any case. I'm glad everything got resolved.

That's what I thought, but…

As Ayase looked downwards, she continued in a frustrated tone with a "But…"

"… As I thought, this is hopeless… I definitely want to make up with Kirino. I want to make up with Kirino… but I can't approve of your hobby…!"

She mumbled things like a certain someone had a while ago. Kirino and I both simultaneously widened our eyes.

"W-What are you saying?! Didn't you say you were going to make up with me?!"

"…… I…….. sniff……."

After Kirino angrily yelled at her, Ayase began to cry.

Blinking a number of times, she wiped the corner of her eye with the back of her hand, and choked out her words through her tears.

"Because…. Because… I really can't do it… Kirino… I-I….. those types of games and manga… I honestly hate them…. I really hate them…. even if they don't make you a criminal, they're dirty, repulsive, disgusting things… I might be overreacting… but… sorry, it's useless…"

"……. Oogh……"

As expected, Kirino also was in pain, and recoiled.

We had proven that there was no connection between otaku and crime. That misunderstanding had been settled, and Kirino had gotten her feelings across.

But in the end, there was still the matter of the characteristic psychological prejudice of junior high school girls. It was a negative image that couldn't be wiped away.

This particular situation was truly futile. It wasn't a matter of misunderstandings, but was squarely in the realm of Ayase's personal principles.

"W-What should I do…? Kirino… what…. what should I do…?"

Ayase gazed at Kirino with desperate eyes.

No matter how she tried, it seemed that her feelings did not allow for compromise.

She wanted to make up with Kirino. But, she couldn't approve of otaku.

She also couldn't just pretend nothing had happened. This inflexibility came from her belief in cleanliness.

"……."

And then Kirino, who had been driven into a corner…

"Oogh…."

Suddenly turned and faced me.

"Do something!" she seemed to be saying to me.

… You want me to do something here?! You're turning to me now?! Even though you had told me to not to butt in…!

"…. Kirino…. I….. I….. ugh……"

"Uuuuuughh…"

Blink, blink blink blink. "Fast! Do something now! You want to be killed?!" she seemed to want to tell me with the rapid winking she was sending my way. B-But… even if you tell me to do something… ugh…

I mean… I did happen to prepare a trump card for situations like this… but… this was… honestly, I really didn't want to do that. I did prepare it just for this meeting, but however I think about it, it wasn't a good

thing. But maybe, with this, they could actually make up with each other…

U-Ugh….. dammit, if I think about this any longer, it'll soon be too late.

Screw it! I should just go for it! Dammit! Don't blame me if something bad happens!

After you hear my brilliant explanation, don't regret it, alright?!

"… Hold on, Ayase. Listen to what I have to say."

"?"

Ayase watched me through her upturned, tear-filled eyes. I started speaking nervously.

"You think that this hobby we're obsessed with is dirty … and no matter what you can't approve of it, so you can 't make up with Kirino. Right?"

"…. T-That's obvious, isn't it… because, because…"

Well, that's what junior high school girls were like, wasn't it? It would be unreasonable for me to just tell her to approve of it.

"Well, let's remodel that opinion of yours then. Take a look at this…"

From my school bag, I took out a thick book I had just borrowed today from the library.

"… The Odyssey… and… the Nihon Shoki?" [119]

… She recognized them, yeah?

Yes, what I just handed over to Ayase was the ancient Greek epic poem "The Odyssey," and the oldest record of Japanese history, the Nihon Shoki. [120] I also handed over a third book, entitled "Egyptian Myth – Osiris and Isis." As Ayase stood puzzled by my intentions, she wiped her tears and her gaze dropped down to the books .

"Izanagi and Izanami…. Cronus and Rhea… Osiris and Isis… and then…"

Labels were taped onto the books, so she probably knew where to look.

Ayase scanned the books from start to end, and she became even more bewildered.

"… What's this for?"

"Those are all stories of older brother and younger sister deities. There are alternative theories, but… these siblings all got married a long time ago."

"Umm… excuse me, but what exactly do you want to say? What does this have to do with Kirino's hobby?"

"Well, just hold on. Just keep what I said in mind. The real article I want to get to is this…"

I slowly took my trump card out of my bag.

"T-That's…?!"

Kirino raised her voice in astonishment. If you want to know why, it's because the things I took out of my bag were the treasured "little sister ero doujinshi" Kirino had bought at summer Comiket.

I handed the ero doujinshi casually over to Ayase.

Ayase blinked in surprise, but began to flip through the books…

Smack! Her hand slapped me across the face.

"W-Why are you showing me this?! Do you have a death wish or something?!"

Is that something you should be saying after you smack me?! Owwwwww…! What the hell, this girl?!

"D-Disgusting! D-D-D-Disgusting! How shameless, you pervert!"

"… Disgusting? You're wrong… you're mistaken, Ayase! Those books are not disgusting at all! The books I just handed over to you are all written with the same topic in mind!"

"Wha-?!"

"What are you saying?"

Kirino's mouth hung half open, and spoke as if she had just realized what was happening. After all her

brother is going through to convince Ayase, she's being quite uncooperative.

I spread my arms wide, and proclaimed my argument to Ayase.

"Just think back! That collection of ours that you called dirty… they're all drawn works of art on the love of an older brother and her younger sister! Am I wrong?! Is there even one exception?! There isn't, is there?! So how are these different from the hard covers I just handed you?! Just because one is older and one is newer?! If I mixed them together, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference!"

"W-What did you just put into the same category as these national myths?!"

"Incest doujinshi, of course! Got a problem with that?! What's drawn in those ero books are the stories of love between an older brother and younger sister that have been passed down by humanity since ancient times. It's the most beautiful, precious literature in the world. Yes, our strong feelings for these things are definitely not evil at all!"

Because…

I quickly pointed to the things in Ayase's hands, and shouted with tears flowing from my eyes.

"Those are… those are the proof of the love between Kirino and me!"

There was no mistaking that this was the most idiotic thing I've said in my life.

"Eeeehh?!"

"W-W-Wha-…"

Both Kirino and Ayase looked at me with their eyeballs stretched out of their sockets.

"W… What outrageous things are you running your mouth with-mmph!"

In an instant, I hugged Kirino and smothered her face, cutting her off.

She wriggled and squirmed in protest, but I wrapped her arms around her back and somehow also pinned those down.

As I hugged her tight out of "proof" of our mutual love, Ayase stared at us, dumbfounded.

"W-W-W… What are you…?!"

Just like Ayase had done back when she had gotten angry, I went on and on without letting her speak.

"It's just as it looks, Ayase. We love each other! That's why we have to collect these stories of forbidden love! Don't call our love for each other dirty! It's literature, didn't I say?! There are drawings of naked girls in there? There are passionate ero scenes in there? That's not the true substance of these works! They aren't as trashy as people like you claim they are!!"

As I continued to ad-lib, I gradually became more and more emotional, and soon wasn't even conscious of what was coming out of my mouth… the line began to blur between where the act ended and where my true feelings began. Before I knew it, my mouth was moving unconsciously and the words were flowing out on their own.

"… Kirino's hobby is what reconnected the sibling ties that had been broken between us. If I hadn't found out about her hobby back then, we would have continued to

have a cold relationship with each other. I couldn't do anything to help the number one little sister by my side. I would say that it had nothing to do with me, and would only watch as my little sister cried…! So I'm thankful from the bottom of my heart! Thankful for all of this otaku hobby that you say is so dirty! Because this hobby existed, I was able to start a real sibling relationship with my little sister! And I stopped just standing by watching my little sister cry, making terrible excuses of how it didn't have anything to do with me! … Can anybody dare to deny these feelings I have?! I'm not lying, these things are proof of our love for each other! So, just listen to me, because… I…"

I hugged my struggling little sister close with all my strength, and desperately shouted.

-

"I LOOOOOOVE MY LITTLE SISTER!!!!"

-

After I shouted this from the depths of my soul, all the light extinguished from Ayase's eyes. She let the books drop to the floor.

"……"

Even though I had released her from my hold, for some reason Kirino stood stock still, her mouth flapping open and shut.

While Kirino unsteadily waved from side to side, Ayase came closer and took Kirino by the hand as if to steal her from me… and hugged her close.

"Kirino…. Let's make up. Right away."

"A-Ayase…?"

"I'm sorry… sorry… for saying those things are dirty, that I can't approve of them… this isn't a time to be making such a big deal over the little things… I'm really sorry… I didn't realize…"

"Eh? Eeh?"

Kirino seemed completely bewildered as her close friend hugged her tight and wailed.

O-Ohh… I did it.

Even I didn't think that would work this well. After all , Ayase was strongly prejudiced. But Kirino's hobby, and these doujinshi were not just dirty things. If I pleaded that point desperately with her, even if the argument didn't completely make sense, I thought that perhaps she would accept what I was saying.

Hm… it seems that my speech didn't completely go to waste.

"… Geez, well that was all pretty troublesome."

With a cynical smile, I started heading towards the two girls…

"D-Don't come any closer, hentai!"

Ayase hugged Kirino close as if to protect her, and gave me a glare.

… Huh?

"….. Uummm… who are you talking to?"

"Shut up! Don't talk, hentai! Hentai hentai hentai! You 're making my ears bleed!"

Huh… well this was a bit different from what I was expecting! I was correct in thinking that she was really prejudiced, and she had seemed to have accepted my argument… but didn't she jump to an incredibly strange conclusion here by herself?!

Ayase stared at me with her empty, dark eyes.

"As I thought, you're the source of all this evil…! Never touch my close friend again! You're dirty! Repulsive! Disgusting!"

"A-Aya… se…?"

Still holding onto Kirino's hand, she quickly began to distance herself from me.

She swiftly turned back around one more time,

"… You're disgusting, go and die."

Giving me a glance as if she was looking at a piece of garbage, she left her sharp parting remark with me.

"……"

I was left alone in that abandoned playground.

"… And everything went according to plan!"

Isn't that great, Kirino? You were able to properly make up with your close friend.

Ahh, there's something in the corner of my eye… sniff.

In this way, following that time, another black mark was engraved into my life's history.

What follows is the necessary account of what happened afterwards.

A week had passed since that incident.

First, in regards to my relationship with Kirino…

You could say that it was still the worst. After that incident, we had not spoken a word to each other, we did not even look at each other, and, in the end, that brat didn't even come within five meters of me.

She was treating me as if I was some dirty thing… or better yet, as if I didn't exist.

I was being completely ignored. It wasn't even as if we had gone back to square one.

My relationship with my sister had deteriorated to an unprecedentedly bad level.

I had thought that it was impossible for her to hate me anymore than she already did, but I guess there was definitely room for our relationship to fall further…

… This was a hole I could never dig myself out of, wasn't it?

That's understandable, considering what a mess of that situation I had made.

But, well… why did I do such a thing again?

After I turned off the switch, after my frenzy had died down, after I had returned to my senses…

That was the first thing that came to mind.

Spitting out such embarrassing things, being so dedicated at great personal risk, and in the end getting both Kirino and Ayase to really hate me…

"Hah… how pitiful…"

Well, there's no helping it. This was just the result of my carrying out my own will, and doing what I wanted to do.

At the very least, I didn't regret what I did, so I would quietly accept the consequences.

I mean… I was at least able to achieve my goal of getting Kirino and Ayase to make up.

In the end, my embarrassing actions, and my pathetic feelings… they weren't all wasted, right?

Moving along, there was also my relationship with Manami…

This was well… how do I put it? It was the same as always.

"Something really bothering you, Kyou-chan?"

"Hm? Uh, no, nothing really."

It was morning in the classroom.

Today, as every other day, I came to school with my childhood friend, arrived at my desk, and gave a halfhearted reply as I shook my head.

"I see. I'm glad, then."

Manami gave me an aimless smile. That smile has been a tremendous help to me through the days.

These were the same days that were repeating over and over. It was a time I couldn't even bear being separated from for three days.

And, even if these days begin to change little by little …

Even if I can't stop these changes from happening…

I would manage somehow. Because bonds that are broken can be reconnected anew.

As long as the two people desired it to be so, their relationship could be born anew, as strong as they wanted it to be.

Unexpectedly, the changes I was so terrified of before … may not be as dreadful as I made them out to be. Because at any rate, those were the changes I chose myself.

Lately, I've come to be able to think that way… thanks to a certain someone.

"Hey, hey, look Kyou-chan… my hair's returned back to normal, hasn't it?"

"I see. I'm glad, then."

I couldn't see it at all. Also… didn't she cut it before summer vacation? What are you saying now? Her hair is seriously freaky.

"Come on, look at iiit…"

"I'm looking I'm looking. It looks really cute."

"… Really?"

"Ah, really really. Your skin has been really glossy lately too. You're becoming quite beautiful, aren't you?"

This was getting tiresome, so I just threw an adequate compliment her way. With an “eh, ehh~,” the simple Manami closed both her eyes tightly, and moving her bag to and fro [121], gave an awkward, shy grin.

“Ehehe… is that so? M-maybe it’s because I’ve been able to get a lot of sleep. See, ever since before summer break… I’ve been sleeping together with ‘Kyou-chan.’”

“What the hell are you saying here in the classroom?!”

She was talking about the hug pillow, after all!

And then, at least, there was Kirino’s relationship with Ayase.

It was after school on that day. When I came back from school, just like she had done in the past, my sister was on the phone in the living room.

“I’m home.”

As I gave the standard greeting upon returning home, not only was there no response, but she didn’t even glance in my direction.

In her sailor uniform, Kirino was sitting deeply in the sofa with her legs crossed under her extremely short skirt , and was nodding at something while on her phone.

"Yeah, I'm alright. Thanks, Ayase. There's nothing to be worried about…. Yeah… mm… ahaha… really… mm … oh yeah, do you want to go shopping together tomorrow?"

And that's how it was. Having been branded with the stigma of the "hentai brute older brother," it's not like I could have asked her directly about it, but it seemed that their relationship was doing relatively well.

Because, at any rate… it seemed like almost every day, they were calling each other and chatting on the phone.

She couldn't permit Kirino to have such a dirty hobby, but also didn't want to separate from her… Ayase was imprisoned in a paradoxical situation, but by using me as a scapegoat, it seemed that she had found a loophole out of the paradox.

The other day, I had gotten an email in my inbox.

"To the big liar of an onii-san,

Because of you, I could make up with Kirino. Don't think that I have approved of Kirino's hobby, and don't think that I am withdrawing the opinions I presented the other day… but while I can't come to a compromise, and while I can't accept her hobby, I've decided to move on. There's no helping it. But, don't think that I've given up! I will definitely save Kirino from your evil influence one day! I will definitely not lose to you!

PS: If you ever do anything dirty to Kirino, I'm going to kill you."

Well? Scary, wasn't it? I never wanted to meet face-to-face with that girl again.

But……. that email……. well, whatever.

I drank down my tinge of doubt with a bottle of cola. From the refrigerator, I returned to the living room, and passed by my sister's side.

"Alright, Ayase, I'll see you tomorrow at school."

Kirino cut off the phone call, and looked bashful.

When I saw her looking happy like this, the entire conflict with Ayase and the stigma that had been passed down to me all seemed like trivial matters. Just now, I could think like that.

I'm glad. I sent my final blessings to the little sister I would probably never talk to again.

Well, at any rate…

With this, now, our life advice session to make fond summer memories for her had come to an end.

This was the last time. Certainly, this time was the last time.

Because my relationship with Kirino, because of what had happened, had hit rock bottom.

Because Kirino probably now knew how risky it was to come to me for advice.

At long last, I could return to the quiet, normal days I had wished for from the bottom of my heart.

Now, I wouldn't be forced to play eroge, and wouldn't be dragged to absurdly tiring events… it was nice.

Shrugging my shoulders, I tried to leave the room.

"Hey."

I already had my hands gripped around the doorknob when I stopped.

Then, my sister spoke with her usual blunt tone of voice.

"Come here for a second."

… ugeeh…

I suddenly turned around. Still gripping the doorknob tightly, my eyes widened.

H-How many days has it been since I've talked to her …? What does she want with me now?

"Why do you look so confused? Come on, quickly."

"… Alright…"

Giving up, I did as my sister had ordered. I soon stood in front of the sofa, and gulped.

… W-What kind of abuse was going to be hurled my way…?

I had steeled myself, but for some reason Kirino looked down and seemed to have a hard time saying what she wanted to…

"… Umm… you… when you shouted that back then… how serious were you being?"

"Ah? D-Does that matter?"

Why was she asking this all of a sudden…?

I mean, let's just drop that subject, please! I'm begging you! When I looked at her with pleading eyes…

The atmosphere around Kirino completely changed.

"Y-Yes… it does matter…"

She looked downwards, grasping tightly onto the hem of her skirt, and her cheeks were flushed.

… What? What was up with that… that strange response? That's… not like you… at all…

Bewildered, I asked.

"Why?"

"…….. You don't know?"

From her position on the sofa, she looked upwards, hot in the head, and gazed at my face.

When our eyes met, I realized that Kirino's eyes were wet.

Her face was red, as if she had caught a cold.

"… Well… because…."

Becoming frightened by my sister's state, I took a step or two back.

And then Kirino, as if saddened and helpless at seeing my actions, looked like she was about to cry.

She stood up from the sofa, and desperately caught my sleeve.

"….. Do you really…… not know…?"

… Well… maybe… there was that… but how should I respond…?

Seeing me completely perplexed and unable to speak, Kirino resolved herself and began her confession.

She spoke while looking downwards, trying not to make eye contact.

"You're too slow… idiot… don't make me say it… it's embarrassing…"

Gulp.

I gulped down a mouth of saliva.

"I… I… I thought about what you said back then… and then… umm… that is… oo… this is hard to say… s-so… please just listen?"

After that, Kirino resolutely raised her head, and faced me directly. Then, she gathered her strength.

Y-You…! W-What are you trying to say?

"I… a-also love my aniki… maybe."

"S-S-Seriously?!"

-

"…What did you think I would say? Why are you getting all worked up over it? You gross siscon."

-

"Wha….. t-t-t-thi…. this……"

My mouth and eyes opened wide, I couldn't do anything but stand there in mute amazement.

I mean, just look at my face! Dammit! Daaaammit! Daaaaaaammmmiiitt!!!

This is impossible! This girl! ….! Crap…!!

My head was burning up, and I grabbed it with both hands, twisting my body harshly back and forth.

"Kyahahaha! That's so lame! Y-You're such an idiot… you were actually being serious, weren't you?! Groooooss ~~! Ahahaha!"

Laughing uproariously and pointing at me, Kirino finally wiped away her tears, and poked my stomach with her elbow.

"Come on, how long are you going to stand there looking like an idiot? Let's go, you siscon!"

She pulled strongly on my sleeve, and lightly turned around. A daring smile appeared on her face.

-

"You promised to play me in Siscali, remember?"

Afterword

This is Fushimi Tsukasa. Thank you very much for acquiring this volume of “Ore no Imouto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai.”

I feel relieved that I safely managed to release this book. Even more than volume 1, after many many revisions, and even after sending the book to press there were still many issues, so I was scared to death until the very end of the process, and I hope that in these four months I managed to do every last thing I could have done.

How was it? If you laughed even once, that would be enough to make me happy.

This time as well, my head editors Miki-san and Kobara-san were both extremely supportive. Kobara-san stayed on from the first volume, and primarily lent me much of his wisdom on the proper nouns I used in the book. And Miki-san, as the master planner behind the book, worked out many of the strategies I used to write the book. He helped suggest many of the key characters

that appeared in this work, as well as proposed many of the catchy, sharp themes of the work, and I am indebted to him in many ways.

This series was made slowly by means of closed meetings and countless revisions, and was very hard on my head editors. So, rather than being my book, this is the work of four people, including the illustrator. I really must emphasize that. I must write that over and over. We often had differences of opinions and butted heads, but I am thankful towards my two editors.

Thank you very much. I know it may be hard, but please continue to take care of me from here on out.

Thank you as well to Kanzaki Hiro-san. His [122] rough illustrations are amazing! Even though you spent so much effort drawing for me, I'm so sorry I couldn't include Kanako in this volume…!

When I heard that this book would be serialized, I was both surprised and nervous. There were people who were asking "will you continue this story?" weren't there ?

In the first volume, I presented characters that caught the readers' attentions, and I was troubled at how to go about the following volumes, considering the first impact of the characters were already gone.

Not relying on character creation and putting effort into the main plotline was the major premise, but if that wasn't enough it would be troubling. In the end, this work was crafted into its final form after meetings with my head editors.

Furthermore, in regards to the current events and happenings that occur in the work, there are many situations that occur, and parts of them subtly differ from what has happened in reality. I am very sorry, but please keep that in mind.

I am thinking of approaching the third volume from a slightly different direction than I have been taking up until now.

Because I can properly apply the feedback I received from everyone from the first volume to the third volume. This might be self-aggrandizing, but I really think it will turn out well.

Please look forward to it.

- November 2008, Fushimi Tsukasa

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Shin Imouto Taisen – Shisukaripusu. I'm assuming Shisukaripusu is a play on words on Apocalypse.
2. ↑ Approximately 120 square feet.
3. ↑ Kyousuke refers to these as her "front side" and her "back side."
4. ↑ I have a hard time believing that anybody in 2008 (when this volume was published) doesn't know what Wiki is…
5. ↑ Social Networking Service
6. ↑ CG here refers to the sequence in game that corresponds to the ero scene.
7. ↑ Hentai CG – refers to a CG sequence in which something pornographic occurs.
8. ↑ Manami's family
9. ↑ Ecchi, hentai, ero... pretty much all synonyms
10. ↑ This is written in English in the novel.
11. ↑ Fujiwara Norika is a Japanese model and once was Miss Japan (in 1992).
12. ↑ Saori uses the wrong Kanji for the "Kyou" in "Kyousuke" here. The kanji she uses actually means something like "evil" or "wicked."

13. ↑ Just like any other time Saori has spoken online, all of this is done in very formal, rather stiff language.
14. ↑ She says something like “use your peripheral vision.”
15. ↑ “Ojamashimasu!” The polite thing to say when entering someone else’s house in Japan.
16. ↑ Ecchi means perverted.
17. ↑ A type of moe character, characterized by her use of glasses.
18. ↑ Referred to by Kyousuke as “otatalk.”
19. ↑ This is pretty much impossible to encapsulate in English. Kirino ends her previous sentence with “jan ,” which is a rather casual cutesy way to end a sentence.
20. ↑ Although Saori started the conversation in a rather formal way, once she figured out that it was indeed Kyousuke on the line, she slipped back into her rather strange old way of talking.
21. ↑ This is how Saori has been talking.
22. ↑ Fan-made manga and/or artbooks. Huge in Japan . A large portion of doujinshi are pornographic in nature.
23. ↑ Short for sister complex. You get the point.

24. ↑ Through this all, she refers to Kyousuke as “ onii-san,” which is a respectful term for “older brother.”
25. ↑ Not too sure what a desk pad is anyways. Google image searching turned up results for what looked like mousepads, folders, clipboards, etc… Whatever, it’s not that important to the story.
26. ↑ Kuzukiri are chilled noodles, usually served with a sweet sauce.
27. ↑ Theme park in Nikko that highlights the Edo period of Japanese History.
28. ↑ It doesn’t sound as weird in Japanese if you say “ tadaima” when going into someone else’s home. A more literal translation of “tadaima” would be “just now.”
29. ↑ Reasonably respectful way to say “grandfather.” I will try not to translate honorifics when it makes sense not to.
30. ↑ “Baa-san” translates to “grandmother.” He is referring to his wife in a sort of casual way.
31. ↑ Expressionist painting by Edvard Munch. Google image search it. I’m sure you’ve seen it before.
32. ↑ Neechan is an endearing term that means “older sister.”
33. ↑ Ponzu is a citrusy thin sauce very popular in Japanese cuisine.

34. ↑ Dragon Quest reference to a spell that confuses enemies. Dragon Quest references do not make me a happy camper.
35. ↑ He says her eyesight is less than 0.1, which is a measure of eyesight I'm not familiar with. So I just translated it as "really bad eyesight."
36. ↑ Japanese fashion style often associated with school uniforms. Wiki it.
37. ↑ Translated more literally as "with a smile as if she had a halo above her head."
38. ↑ Punpun here probably is an expression of mild unhappiness or annoyance. But I didn't translate it so the next line would make sense.
39. ↑ Mimetic word – a word that mimics something that doesn't make a sound.
40. ↑ He says "HYO." I have no idea what that means. My best guess is that it's some form of HEY or HEYO.
41. ↑ Some wrestling move of some random character from some random anime. Hell if I know. Click here for more information.
42. ↑ He's presumably talking about a good ending for an eroge.
43. ↑ Literally, "If you are begging, look here!" which I interpreted as "These are the items you should beg your boyfriends/parents/whatever for."

44. ↑ Yes, it's technically Kirino's computer, and he never says "my" in the novel. But Japanese can get away with this – English cannot. It would have sounded really awkward if I wrote "Quickly reviving the computer from standby."
45. ↑ Are these pillows that have characters printed on them or pillows shaped like characters? I don't know. Google Image Search also seems to be noncommittal.
46. ↑ Avenue Q would disagree.
47. ↑ If you need a refresher, these events are described in Volume 2, Chapter 2-4. Ed: on the original sight each chapter was split into multiple parts: This comment refers to an earlier part of this chapter, not the next few chapters.
48. ↑ Here, the way Manami says it, it sounds like Kyousuke confessed to her. The word "like" in Japanese is much more commonly used in the romantic sense than it is in English.
49. ↑ He actually says he wants to say that to "praise himself." This doesn't translate well to English at all, so I left it out.
50. ↑ Literally, "I couldn't get enough of looking at the evening sun."
51. ↑ Japanese Buddhist festival. Need more info? Click here.

52. ↑ Shink-Kiba is a railway station in Tokyo. The Rinkai line is another train line in Tokyo, which has a stop in Odaiba at the *HINT HINT* Tokyo Big Sight Convention Center.
53. ↑ He says “sankyuu,” not “arigatou.”
54. ↑ Caribbeancom.com is the offending website that Kyousuke visited. It is apparently often shortened to Ka Biankomu. Ugh, don’t ask me. Sappari wakaranai.
55. ↑ Abbreviated “Natsu-Komi.”
56. ↑ Some top level dragon-type Monster Hunter boss oh my god these references are pissing me off why do I need Wikipedia to read this damn thing grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.
57. ↑ He says “a few tens of minutes,” for which there is really no clean translation in English.
58. ↑ The online system on which these games are played.
59. ↑ The supposed staircase that leads to the underworld. Also the last dungeon of Persona 4. YAY PERSONA 4!!! *fanboy dance*
60. ↑ Toranoana, bookstore in Japan. If I recall correctly , they also sell doujinshi.
61. ↑ More literally, “reluctantly, Kirino and I put down our weapons.”

62. ↑ I can vouch for this… it is awful. Imagine 500,000 people crammed into a single convention center without air conditioning.
63. ↑ The groups that produce doujinshi are usually referred to as doujinshi circles.
64. ↑ The romaji literally comes out to “fanneru,” which is closest to funnel. This is a slang term that means… well, keep reading.
65. ↑ I haven’t actually heard of this one, but wiki appears to suggest that it is a figure convention.
66. ↑ Zombie video game.
67. ↑ He doesn’t actually say “Kirino” here, but it’s so unclear who spoke this line that I added this in to clarify.
68. ↑ The actual term she uses is “MAP Heiki,” or roughly “map weapon,” which after Google Searching for a while I determined is closest to “AoE attack,” or “Area of Effect attack.” As in, when you play a strategy game or RTS game, there are some special abilities that will attack all enemies within an certain area and do damage to them. If somebody else has a better translation for this, feel free to tell me. But damn, Kuroneko is just a bit sadistic isn’t she?
69. ↑ American director for Dawn of the Dead, Night of the Living Dead, etc. WHOAAA REFERENCE TO

SOMETHING THAT DIDN'T GIVE ME A HEADACHE TO FIGURE OUT?! Surprising.

70. ↑ Indeed, "circle" can be used to describe a club in a Japanese high school or college as well.
71. ↑ He says shutter. I'm assuming that it's basically a garage door type opening in this case.
72. ↑ She doesn't really specify that she's talking about the "weather," but just says "it wasn't like this yesterday or the day before." From context though, she is probably talking about the weather.
73. ↑ Literally, "you won't be able to do battle."
74. ↑ You could say Idols are the Japanese equivalent to Western singers, but that's not really right. You could say Idols are the Japanese equivalent to "girls who are famous for being cute," but that's not really right. You could say that this translator's note is getting too long, but shut up.
75. ↑ If you don't know what this means, then I probably shouldn't tell you.
76. ↑ A more literal translation of what he said would be "country with freedom."
77. ↑ More literally, "30000 yen felt like a real amount."
78. ↑ Yes, he's referring to the DBZ character. Ughhhhhhhh Kyousuke being a DBZ nerd makes me feel…… (guess which show I'm staunchly NOT a fan of)

79. ↑ Not quite Kyousuke. One is translating this novel.
80. ↑ Literally, “Cell is against the rules.”
81. ↑ Youth fashion district in Tokyo.
82. ↑ He actually says “fatherly” instead of “brotherly,” but I really don’t think anybody in Kyousuke’s situation would describe themselves as “fatherly” in English.
83. ↑ I assume he mumbled “That’s great, Kirino” (yokatta, Kirino), but there are no quote marks around this statement in the novel. But that’d be what I would guess.
84. ↑ It literally says “her mouth took the shape of a wave,” and there is a little picture of this shape in the book. Imagine a tilde (~) except going on like that for a few cycles. I have no idea how to input this into a word processor, so I omitted it.
85. ↑ The word is “youki,” which I vaguely translated to spiritual energy.
86. ↑ It’s been a while since we’ve seen this word, so I’ll just copy and paste the footnote related to this word from volume 1: “jakigan” describes the “third eye” some characters have (hence superpowered), but also usually is related to a personality type of a brooding teenager (think Sasuke from Naruto). Ed: We use a different volume 1 translation, which does not have said footnote

87. ↑ Time, place, and occasion.
88. ↑ A news site I guess. This is it I believe. Ironically, I see an Oreimo ad on the left hehe. And the circle goes round and round and round….
89. ↑ Initially, I thought HG stood for Hentai Game and I was severely confused by this sentence. But then I Googled it and found it stood for High Grade. Ugh, I've been reading too much Oreimo…
90. ↑ Promotional Video, in case you didn't know.
91. ↑ The term he uses is actually "companion," which also can mean a female model used at trade show booths.
92. ↑ An alternative name is given in the book as " Crack Knuckles." Which sounds uber lame so I went with the other one.
93. ↑ King of Fighters reference… and Level 8 seems to be the highest difficulty setting in that game series. If this is wrong, blame Google, not me.
94. ↑ In case you're curious, Kyousuke actually uses the word "hentai." Which can just generally mean " weirdo," and doesn't necessarily have to carry the connotation of "pervert."
95. ↑ I will not translate the names of cities or subway stations in the translation. But in case you're curious this translates roughly to "international exhibition center."

96. ↑ It more literally says “with a sound effect.”
97. ↑ Japanese holiday. Ed: there was a footnote in an earlier chapter about it
98. ↑ I guess a more literal translation here would be “ Serves you right.” But I dunno… I wanted the line to have a bit more pizzazz. Pizzazz. Pizzazz. Mmm that’s a fun word. Pizzaaaaazz. Man, these translator’s notes are getting more and more ADD by the second.
99. ↑ Models that mostly focus on sexual attractiveness and do work aimed for male audiences. For more info, check here.
100. ↑ I’m not sure who this line belongs to. It could be Kyousuke expressing frustration at the incredible amounts of stupidity, or it could be Kirino getting driven into a corner.
101. ↑ Mmm… methinks Ayase’s drugs are starting to kick in.
102. ↑ Kyousuke could here be referring either to his own life being screwed up or to the crazy people around him. In context, I’m more tempted to go with the former interpretation.
103. ↑ Kyousuke could here be referring either to his own life being screwed up or to the crazy people around him. In context, I’m more tempted to go with the former interpretation.

104. ↑ Of course, Comiket is just an abbreviation of " Comic Market."
105. ↑ See Volume 2, Chapter 2, near the end. Manami pretty much recites Kyousuke's little speech verbatim… man, that's rather creepy.
106. ↑ One of the annoying things about Japanese is that the verbs "to ask" and "to listen" are the same verb. So I guess he could be saying "I can ask her about it, " but experience says that "listen" is probably a more appropriate translation.
107. ↑ Hey, don't look at me. Go look at wiki instead.
108. ↑ More literally, "I didn't think 'awww, poor thing' even for a second."
109. ↑ You know, I went back to make sure I didn't miss something, but I can't find where in the novel it says that Kyousuke had made physical contact with Kirino in the first place. But there is no other way to interpret this line.
110. ↑ He actually says "all that I did." Which I interpreted as making progress in their relationship. Otherwise it would sound too much like a non sequitur.
111. ↑ The term she uses is lover's suicide, which is a term much more recognized in Japan than in English, so I tried to make the intent here more clear in the English.

112. ↑ More literally, “What exactly of yours do you think I am?” Sort of like “Have you forgotten what relationship I have with you?”
113. ↑ He literally does say “precious jewels” here, which in Japanese is often a colloquial term for “ testicles.” Alright, I’m going to end this translator’s note here before it devolves into a thrilling discussion of the many diverse and colorful metaphors for the male genitalia.
114. ↑ Japan’s version of Congress, called the National Diet, is split bilaterally just like the US Congress, into a lower “House of Representatives” and a higher “House of Councilors.”
115. ↑ He uses an idiom, “the clouds were becoming suspicious.”
116. ↑ Quite literally, they were “parallel lines.”
117. ↑ This might be by far the longest ellipsis I’ve seen in this light novel to date.
118. ↑ For the longest time I thought the previous long line was Ayase talking about Kirino, until I read this line. Oh Kirino…
119. ↑ The Odyssey is precisely the one written by Homer. The Nihon Shoki is a book of classic Japanese history.
120. ↑ The Nihon Shoki is actually the second oldest record of Japanese history, not the first. It is

preceded by the Kojiki. Looks like Kyousuke needs to study a bit more with Manami…

121. ↑ It literally says “she made her bag go pitter patter. ” I interpret this to mean that she is swaying shyly forwards and backwards and her bag (which is in front of her) is hitting her skirt over and over, but that’s a huge mouthful in English.

122. ↑ There is no gender pronoun here, so I’m going to just use “he” instead of writing “he/she” every time .